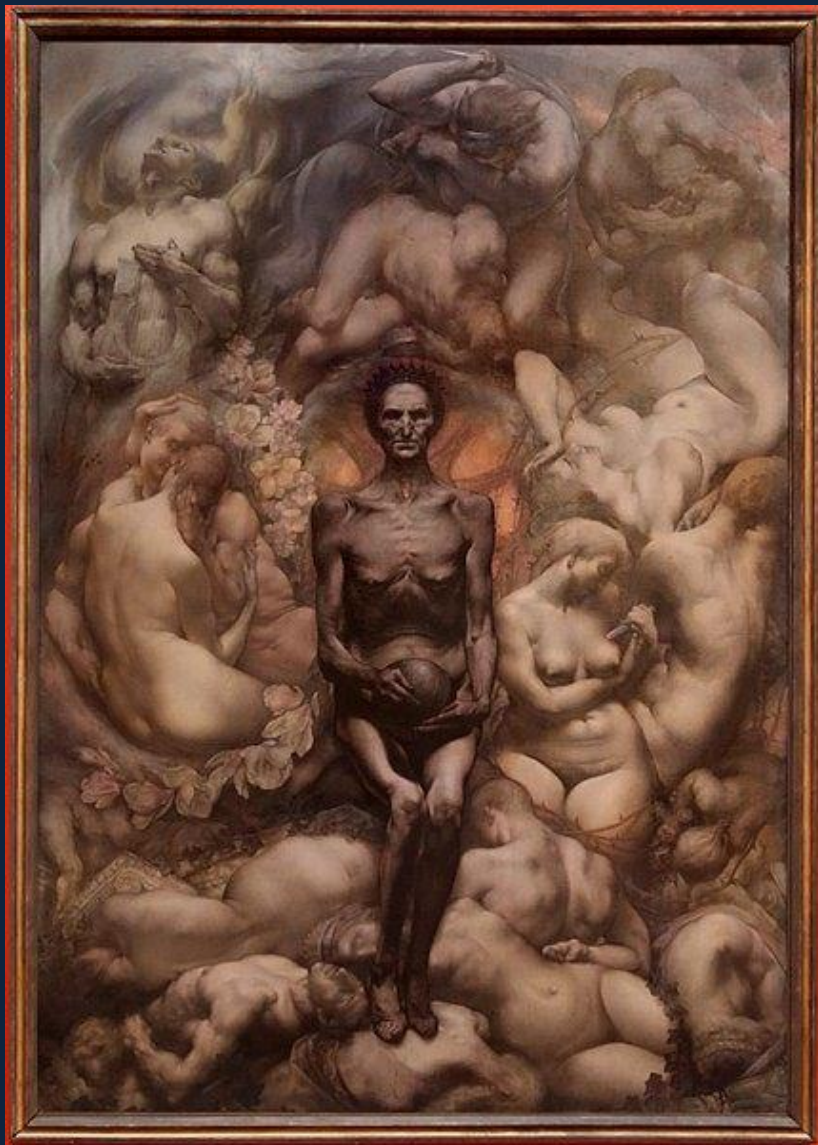


Motivation And Effort In Buddhist Soteriology

Suffering and its Overcoming
in Light of Buddhist & Evolutionary Psychology



Mahaviveka

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By Mahaviveka (Bhikkhu Dhammarakkhita)

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*Behold the marionette,
A piece of wood,
Artfully coloured.
With strings and sticks erected,
Made to dance to the beat
In this spirited way and that.*

*But if the strings and sticks where to be loosened,
Lifted, plucked out,
Torn to shreds and discarded;
Where then would you find that lively spirit?*

*That too is what becomes of these my limbs;
Motionless without the nature that moves them,
Lifeless without the nature that vivifies them;
And where then would you find **my** lively spirit?*

*But to your twisted eyes, naïve human,
That ochre appears with dazzling life,
Though it embellishes but an effigy
Painted before you on a dead wall.*

*Go ahead and seek a like of that golden tree
That you keep seeing in your ludicrous dreams.
Among a crowd of blind men in a great magic-show,
Where there appears to you all illusion,
As real.*

—Subhā jīvakambavanikā therīgāthā (14.1)

Anumodami

This book was written during my 2018-2019 half-year retreat, which I had spent at the foot of the *Phayagon Phaya* pagoda at the outskirts of Khonar village, Shan State, Myanmar.

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Introduction

"A scientific man ought to have no wishes, no affections, - a mere heart of stone." —Charles Darwin.

*This marionette did not create itself;
Its suffering is not created by others.
They both come from a certain cause,
And cease along with its dissolution.*
—Nun Selā (Selā-sutta)

1.

It is said that, soon after the Buddha had finally realised his transcendental goal and became unconditionally free from all forms of mental pain, discontent, and suffering – he considered what did it take in order for him to accomplish that feat, and what course of action led to it. The result was a multifaceted teleological training course that is mostly based philosophically on the recognition of life's and human's intrinsic imperfection and suffering, and psychologically on estrangement and dispassion with regard to all experience, and mentally on the manipulation of the natural interplay between attention, motivation, and memory. This was the case not only because, in the course of his striving to reach his transcendental goal, the Buddha indeed succeeded in employing attention and motivation in such an ingenious way, aligning them all through along with his goal, but also restraining their natural functioning and preventing them from dragging his thought, emotion, memory, and behaviour, to follow the various colourful mundane ends which naturally appeal to the appetite of every living being. In the context of the Buddha's formulation of an effective and pragmatic training course that will enable others to practise what he practised and attain the transcendental freedom and bliss that he managed to attain, the Buddha formulated the *iddhipāda* and the *sammappadhāna*, two integral and very important teachings on motivation and effort which are amongst the least explored or understood of the Buddha's teachings, and on which this book may be regarded as a treatise.

One of the most remarkable aspects about the Buddha's various teachings is that they all connect in a wonderful harmony, emerge from and feed into one another in quite a simple and straightforward manner, especially to the eyes of practitioners whose contact with the teachings is experiential rather than conceptual. Therefore it is not possible to provide an adequate explanation of any specific aspect of the Buddha's doctrine without defining its place and explaining its significance in relation to other aspects of the doctrine, or without identifying at first and with some clarity the role it plays in the grand teleological, soteriological context in which it functions. Thus, a treatise on motivation and effort in Buddhism is bound to be quite expansive, basically because what made motivation and effort so important for the Buddha was that they were precisely the mental functions most intimately related to both the generation of suffering and discontent, and also the emancipation therefrom. It may indeed be argued that most of the Buddha's teachings circled around the theme of how "mundane motivations" that gave rise to all sorts of afflictive attachments are effectively countered by developing "renunciate motivations" which, in turn, deliver one from all attachments and suffering.

One of the most principal teachings of the Buddha, *"the four ennobling truths"*, reveal this dichotomy clearly; the first two of which describe human suffering and the natural motivational bondage which causes it, and the latter two, the emancipation therefrom. Thus, the Buddha began by revealing to his followers how motivation and effort functioned naturally within the heart of all living creatures, and how it resulted in a life characterised essentially by fear, pain, and bondage, and led only to death. Then he would declare that there was a way out, and embark on revealing what that path was. In this book I follow exactly the same scheme, but employ in my descriptive attempts a free and contemporary interpretive approach to the Buddha's ancient teachings, as well as the enlightening knowledge offered us by evolutionary science. The combining of these two traditions of knowledge, separated from one another by a vast expanse of time and seemingly unrelated at first sight, has proven to me to be astoundingly powerful throughout the process of writing this book.

2.

The most serious trouble that we face as we attempt to examine the original teachings of the Buddha is that we can find them preserved only in the *Pāli* texts, with no other reliable independent sources of any kind, except only in punishingly dispersed fragments offering but little clue not only about the content of the teachings themselves, but also about their historicity. The oldest extant *Gandharan* manuscripts date back to the 1st century CE, roughly half a millennium after the Buddha's departure, and they involve a verity of innovative teachings that were probably prevalent at the time, including those of what will later become the Mahayana tradition, which differs in many significant ways, including in the very concept of emancipation, from the Pāli/Theravada tradition that is thought to represent the Buddha's original doctrine. The problem, of course, is that the Buddha's teachings were originally transmitted orally, not only from the Buddha himself to those with whom he spoke, but likewise from one generation to the next after the departure of Buddha and up until the time when they were finally committed to writing. But we have no real idea neither about the time when the Buddha's discourses were first committed to writing nor about by whom they were written and copied, nor have we any solid idea about the historicity of the present Pāli texts, aside from what the Pāli texts themselves are saying about themselves! Though it is believed that a certain process of writing and copying in Pāli may have commenced sometime around the 1st century CE and continued ever since then, the present complete Pāli Canon as we have it today was compiled in Burma as recently as the 19th century, and the oldest extant Pāli manuscripts including whole sections of the Pāli Canon date back to the 5th or 6th century. This makes the reported teachings of the renowned Greek contemplative *Pyrrho of Elis*, written sometime in late 1st century BCE, to be the earliest extant manuscripts which involve a description of some aspects of the Buddha's original teachings.¹

Further, the Pāli text is itself rife with much ambiguity, particularly in the descriptions of matters concerning practice and psychology, the most

¹ Though no explicit reference is made to any "Buddhism", yet judging by the content of his thought, it is almost certain that Pyrrho had adopted at least certain key aspects of the Buddha's doctrine, such as *tilakkhana* or the three intrinsic features of existence, during the Indian campaign of Alexander the Great, which he joined for two years, and from which he returned "a changed man", teaching a new doctrine.

significant aspects of the Buddha's teachings. I came in a recent paper² to the conclusion that a more developed understanding of those texts requires a significant effort of *interpretation of ideas* rather than analysis of language, and that because those ideas were predominantly concerned with "experiences", such as renunciation, meditation, faith, attention, motivation, effort, self-awareness, self-regulation, contemplation, and investigation of transcendental questions and practical experiences – I judged that, just as a genuine understanding of yoga or of any sport requires necessarily a degree or another of actually practising and experiencing of them, likewise a sound interpretation of the ideas contained in the Pāli texts requires necessarily a degree or another of actual experience by the interpreter of those ideas; the limitations of the interpreter's experience being themselves those of how far he or she can develop a sound understanding of the teachings contained in the text.

This concern is highly important for the reader to be aware of, in that it will enable him to remember that whatever it is that he will read anywhere about the Buddha's teachings, lies somewhere across the spectrum which extends from the extreme of ambiguous and literal, word-for-word translations of Pāli texts which offer little or no vibrant meaning, to the other extreme where interpretations that may be vivid and effective in conveying meaning, are yet based predominantly on the interpreter's own personal practice and experience of the Buddhist path, with little or no regard for the text. I could say that I have tried to maintain a middle ground between these two extremes, but that holds true only to a limited extent! The truth is that I am much more inclined toward the latter extreme, and not because I am ignorant about the text or the original language with which it is written, nor due to the absence of any supportive references in it to my interpretations, but rather because I believe that this level of total freedom of inquiry and contemplation, with a solid and sincere and purposeful practice experience beneath and around it, at least potentially yields significant results, on various different levels, and brings to the grand amphitheatre of the world, some truly fresh ideas to consider and debate – all of which seem to have been characteristically lacking in the context of Theravada Buddhist interpretation and understanding, for a long time, despite of the fact that

² Mahaviveka (2018). *Issues with Pāli Literature and its Translation*. Published [online](#).

psychological and scientific exploration and discovery never ceased at any point after the Buddha's Rising and departure, especially in the western tradition which has amounted to many a significant accomplishment – nor are such discoveries irrelevant or unchallenging in various different ways to the Buddha's most excellent teachings; rather they offer a great opportunity for us to cast a refreshing look on those precious teachings, and perhaps even help us understand them better than ever before. Hence follows this my attempt to offer an interpretation of the Buddha's ancient understanding of "the human condition", particularly that of motivation and effort, in line with the significant findings of western evolutionary science, which was established in mid-19th century by the great scientist Charles Darwin, whose exceptionally enlightening work made his name and memory worthy of their immortality.

Thus a word of caution must be uttered here, and the reader must be informed about how we Buddhists often disagree among ourselves regarding various different matters which require interpretation (and all of them do!). This, being fundamentally a book of interpretation of Buddhist teachings in light of evolutionary science, represents only the views and understanding of the author, and not any "Buddhism" which exists independently or abstractly aside from the specific understanding of the author.

It goes without saying that nothing is told in the Pāli text of evolution, natural selection, genetic variation and the like, nevertheless so much is told of "nature", *Samsara*, and of its profoundly dominating impact and influence on the human heart. What makes evolutionary science so closely relevant to the Buddha's teachings is the experiential method which the Buddha had followed in his quest after the truth, resorting only to the least necessary employment of speculation and conceptualisation to understand what was otherwise directly observable and experienceable, thus guarding against the characteristic errors and excesses of judgement which an excessive reliance on the imagination and conceptualisation often begets.

This *empirical* attitude was not unknown before the Buddha's Rising, and the stilling of thought and thinking, and total reliance on dispassionate observation for the discernment of the functioning and significance of phenomena, is a fundamental aspect of the ancient practice of meditation, which the Buddha mastered. The practitioner observes the nature and

functioning of the various mental experiences as they unfold spontaneously, but does not speculate about *why* they unfold; he observes *how* they unfold, simply by noting what necessary conditions exist, each time, before a certain process or function arises, and what necessary conditions exist before it ceases, and what further phenomena does it in turn condition, and so on. It is highly possible that such *scientific* attitude of investigating the human mind was a Buddhist innovation, and if a certain lore and repertoire of knowledge about such conditional processes of human psychology were known in ancient India before the Buddha, and if the Buddha was exposed to them through his journey of spiritual learning and striving, then it will be evident that he finally expanded on them and transformed them in such a manner as to bring them to the high station which we today regard *Buddhist psychology*.

Such Buddhist psychology exists, as a unique and developed corpus of empirically supported, or at least supportable scientific description of the natural fundamental mechanisms regulating the functioning of mind, as well as a science of cognitive-behavioural therapeutic principles and effective methods of engaging with those natural functions to bring about the optimal mental health. Yet the process of drawing the outlines and underlying principles of such Buddhist psychology as a robust and developed science has not yet even begun, and this is basically due to the fact that they are yet to be discovered with vividness and clarity; a task which difficulty is maintained due to the ambiguity and incompleteness of the Pāli texts which retain the Buddha's words uttered 2500 years ago, and a fuller understanding of which could be accomplished only by those who examine the essence and purport of those words in practice and experience rather than merely in concept or abstraction, and who could also thereafter put the effort in formulating and formalising their insights and discoveries in words that are intelligible to contemporary readers who are interested in the study and examination of psychological truth and of the human mind and consciousness.

The study of Pāli and Indic linguistics has failed in presenting a full, or even adequate picture of such Buddhist psychology, which we come to learn about mostly through our own individual experiences, as well as through the explanations offered by other contemporary practitioners. This is not to say that linguistic knowledge, or even mastery, is irrelevant; but only to

emphasise that something beyond that is definitely needed. Hence is my inclination in this book, and in general, to resolve to a more experiential rather than linguistic or conceptual path of inquiry. And in as much as evolutionary science has proven to be readily enlightening and supportive and reinforcing to various important Buddhist teachings, I suspect that further profound and thorough dialogue between western psychology and Buddhist practitioners can enhance our awareness of the many gaps and questions which we will need to handle before a truly scientific Buddhist psychology can be laid out in any detail.

3.

However we must also note that there are several particularly important unique features in Buddhist psychology which differentiate it from various other traditions of knowledge that are concerned with psychology, philosophy, cosmology, and what came to be generally referred to as "*the human condition*": Beyond being just phenomenological, Buddhism is heavily teleological and pragmatic. There is no interest whatsoever in the discovery of any *abstract or ontological truth* in Buddhism, that is, a truth that exists independently from what human can in fact experience and verify in his own experience. But further, that which makes something at all "true" is not merely that it is experienced, but also that it corresponds perfectly and consistently to a certain purpose or goal, that is, a *teleological pragmatic truth* that effectively works out in serving a certain purpose. Thus the idea "water extinguishes fire" is not true in any abstract sense, nor worthwhile in any experiential sense, except only in so far as it demonstrates its effectiveness to someone whose purpose is to extinguish a fire. In this sense, the Buddha saw psychological and philosophical questions, inquiries, positions, and views, as essentially *motivated*, that is, driven by a certain goal even if it was unconscious to its seeker, and he did not exhibit any interest or place any significance in totally abstract and logical investigations that were devoid of a pre-established direction or purpose, and consistently refused to answer purely ontological questions regarding such things as the ultimate nature, origin, and fate of world and self, dismissing all such inquiries as either unfathomable and unknowable, or futile and non-consequential.

The Buddha offered *four* such teleological, pragmatic, verifiable truths, which are relevant and sought by those who are, like he was, seeking a complete and final emancipation from all forms of mental suffering, discontent, and frustration. Thus, whatever expanse Buddhist psychology covers, it is in its entirety driven by and limited to the specific goal of bringing an ultimate end to all forms of mental suffering, and it only so happens that such a goal, as we have seen, covers a vast domain of the mental experience in general, and includes much of what psychology is generally concerned with.

Though such highly teleological nature of Buddhism may at first sight appear identical to western science, in truth it makes it at odds with the latter, which is given to formulating certain rational abstract principles or *axioms* from which the direction of inquiry springs and on the basis of which the corresponding method of inquiry unfolds, resulting finally in the discovery of truth. And though such inquiry may be motivated by the discovery of a certain specific truth about a certain specific phenomenon, and though the researcher may have certain hypothesised expectations or assumptions about such truth; the subsequent line of inquiry that follows continues to be markedly different from the experience of the Buddha, who discovers [and experiences] emancipation first, and then sets about investigating the details of the path that he happened to take which led to it, without need for speculative or deductive reasoning and conceptualisation. This you could say is similar to the exceptional situation in western science, when truth happens to reveal itself accidentally and independently from the designs of the researcher, as in the discovery of penicillin for example.

A further significant difference between Buddhism and western science is that in the latter, there is always some further important truths to be discovered, including in philosophical and psychological matters; whereas in Buddhism, all that needs to be discovered, not in any generality, but specifically *for the purpose of emancipation from suffering*, has been already secured by the Buddha, and no further inquiry is needed in so far as one's purpose is to attain precisely that Buddhist emancipation. We could say that both traditions agree on the absence of any ultimate truth without the realm of empirical observation, and on the possibility of endless inquiry after further truths; but they will disagree on whether such endless inquiry is also *necessary*!

This, I imagine, would have been the Buddha's critique of the western way; the endlessly extended and changing nature of its sense of purpose, and in the flux of what it historically defines as "true". Though the Buddha proclaims no ultimate truths, he does however ascertain that the emancipation which he had experienced, was true, and that its features did not change neither in time nor in place, and that they were identical and stable in all those who would experience them without exception, and, beyond all that, it was all that it takes in order for one to realise a state of transcendent, imperturbable freedom from pain and suffering. Thus, it is a truth that is relative in the sense that it corresponds empirically to the experiencer, but ultimate in the sense that it is stable and unchanging, and paramount in the sense that it renders every other concern and inquiry at least secondary and at most irrelevant to it – thus, it is an *experiential faith*.

In the same way we can understand the Buddha's critique of the myriad other traditions of inquiry and practices which flourished around him: not that they were ultimately wrong, but only in so far as they failed in leading to the goal of emancipation from suffering. The Buddha did offer a criticism of other traditions on the basis of their misunderstanding, or limited understanding of what is it that constituted "suffering" psychologically, and "bondage" cosmologically – and whenever a tradition offered a closely similar definitions of these, as in *Jainism* for example, the Buddha would then criticise their problematic understanding of what constituted emancipation and how to accomplish it effectively and with sureness. Beyond the quest of the ending of suffering the Buddha does not criticise any doctrine as inherently or intrinsically false, should it identify as its goal something other than the ultimate ending of suffering; and Brahmanism or early Hinduism is faulty and inadequate only to someone who is following it seeking to psychologically experience the end of suffering, and cosmologically the end of conditioned existence – but not so if he is following it rather seeking to become united with Brahma the God of gods, a goal the realisation of which Brahmanism does promise, and in relation to which the Buddha does not respond neither with favour nor opposition, but only regards as a faith in which he does not find interest or inspiration comparing to his own faith. Thus, the story shows Venerable Sāriputta the chief disciple of Buddha actually offering meditative advice to a dying Brahmin so as to help him realise his ultimate spiritual goal, rebirth in the realm of God the

Brahma, rather than condemning his faith and practice as inherently false or unbuddhist.

This is such a wonderful and liberating feature in Buddhism; understanding and accepting the faith of others when it is fundamentally different from one's own; and we shall see through some of the pages of this book, that this attitude *could* apply still even in relation to the various Buddhist traditions and sects, when they disagree among themselves even on such fundamental issues as the nature of suffering and of the emancipation therefrom. This again places Buddhism in a somewhat unique place, which transcends the situation described by Ernest Becker,³ where difference on fundamental issues across the various traditions, including western science, often leads to conflict rather than tolerance, and where the empirical and demonstrable nature of inquiry and verification of truth, as it confirms one's own world-view and faith, often concomitantly limits the possibility of coexistence with alternative beliefs and versions of truth. This happens because truth in its abstract form becomes what matters to its respective believers, and thus those who believe the earth to be round find it impossible to coexist with those who believe it flat!

The Buddha's life and teachings clearly point at the importance of not substantiating truth as an abstract construct, but rather as a lived experience that offers meaning, value, and purpose to human life and regardless of what different "things" we believed in. That which confirmed our individual humanity was that we are all pursuing a goal that gave meaning to our existence, and afforded us with a sense of wellbeing, contentment, and nobility. The Buddha, like so many other sages and as in many narratives of mythology and folktales, suggested that no goal surpasses that of waking up to one's suffering; to carry upon oneself the responsibility of transcending it, and he warned that fear and escape from suffering will at least lead to its perpetuation and, at worst, its intensification. Yet the Buddha did not quarrel with those who believed otherwise and pursued other goals, rather he showed unwavering sympathy and compassion for them, as he acknowledged the simple, yet often missed observation, that *the worth of what one believes in does not manifest in what it is abstractly, but rather in what it makes of one practically*. Thus, the earth may indeed be round, but

³ Ernest Becker (1973). *The Denial of Death*.

why are some people so angry and cruel toward those who believe otherwise?! And what does one make of the case when those who believe the earth is flat exhibit no anger and cruelty in return, but rather gentleness and forgiveness?! The earth may not be flat, indeed, but what difference does the earth's shape make for someone who lives on it seeking happiness, serenity, contentment, and deliverance?! And how does a correct realisation of the earth's shape allow one to transcend his innermost suffering, agitation, discontent, and bondage?!

Another important unique feature of the empirical methodology of Buddhist and Indian psychology in general, is that it is founded fundamentally on the observation of *one's own* mind. This is connected with the preceding issue, where truth is not only relative to the experiencer, but also its verification is here based on the manifestation of its impact in *subjective experience*. This also eliminates any possibility of erroneous judgements or evaluations based on the characteristic excesses of the imagination. For here, abstraction itself becomes understood as "unreliable" and "risky" precisely because it proves itself as such through the direct observation of its functioning in one's own mind.

But how could we speak of any "science" out of something as subjective as this? Picture a handful of the first ancient Indian meditators gathering together to share their subjective experiences, only for them to realise that many of these experiences and of the various mental functions that they were able to observe in their own minds, were identical, and that those which were not, differed for reasons that were discernable. This meant that a science can be construed out of surveying the sum and amalgam of all of these subjective experiences, just as the case presently is in western experimental psychology, and which draws its power of demonstration from the fact that a statistical method such as this could only hardly generate any gross falsehoods. The power of the Indian way is further reinforced by the fact that the meditator is not an unwary or oblivious participant in an experiment that is happening in an unnatural situation which may involve multiple mishaps or miscalculations of various natural or designed factors and variables, but simply and directly observes the functioning of his own mind in ways which he himself is skilled in and for reasons which he himself understands. On the basis of the continual accumulation of such subjective experience across many generations, Indian psychology was born, and it finally progressed to

such an extent where *interpretation* of certain types and categories of mental experience, along with their cosmological connotations and purport, became necessary, and resulted in the creation of various more complex schools and traditions of transcendental psychology, in the midst of which Buddhism finally emerged.

Needless to say that there is prevalent in the western way much fear and scepticism regarding the efficacy of such self-reflective methods of inquiry, and endless mistrust and even disdain regarding all its findings and conclusions; and we readily find the imprint of this attitude in the western examination of Buddhism itself, which has relied mostly on linguistic and conceptual methods of analysis rather than actual lived practice experience of the Buddha's psychological teachings. As mentioned earlier, having found the truth first, the Buddha's was a method of *explanation* rather than inquiry of the path which happened to lead to it. But since those with whom the Buddha spoke had not experienced that truth yet, and since they were expected to rely on reasoning and intelligence in their attempt to evaluate it, the Buddha provided them with a method of inquiry on which they could depend in verifying the legitimacy of the emancipatory truth of which he spoke. Despite of the aforementioned unique features of Buddhist psychology and of its method of inquiry, we find that it fundamentally works in the same way just as do the *natural sciences*, in that its conclusions are based on the dispassionate observation of how things happen and why they happen the way they do, and as such it is no more than a process of observation of "nature", both that which exists within and without the living creature.

4.

The Buddhist Scientific-Spiritual Methodology:

Instead of deconstructing complex phenomena (objects and functions) into their simpler constituent components, the Buddhist method is based rather on searching for the immediate causes and conditions of a certain psychological phenomenon, and then searching deeper for the causes and conditions of those, and continuing the search as far back until a dead-end is reached. A "dead-end" is a phenomenon, cosmological or psychological, the

origin of which we couldn't discern *in experience*, and the Buddha describes "existence" and "consciousness" as such transcendental phenomena the cosmological origin of which could only be conceptualised, but never directly experienced.

Of high relevance to us here is understanding the importance of *nirodha* or *cessation* in Buddhist psychology: just as the complete understanding of an object is achieved the moment it has become deconstructed into all its constituent parts, the transcendence of a psychological experience is achieved once the consciousness becomes no longer subject to it, that is, no longer mobilised by it, affected by it, or functions under its sway and through its power. Thus, it is not possible to understand an emotion by feeling it, but only by observing the processes through which it arises, lasts, and ceases. This natural ability to observe one's own mental processes dispassionately is precisely their *intuitive deconstruction*. In likewise manner, it is not possible to understand "understanding" or "thinking" or the "imagination" by thinking about them! Only through this method of dispassionate observation of causes and effects does the intuition grasp these processes and retain the manner of their functioning in memory. One truly, that is, intuitively, grasps everything there is to learn about physiological, emotional, and cognitive functions, when the awareness and recognition is independent from them, and then they appear to the psychologist just as an external object appears to the physicist. But the physicist is truly and entirely separate from the object, where emotion, perception, cognition, and consciousness, are precisely that which makes up both the psychologist himself and the objects which he examines!

Hence is the importance of *nirodha*: The separating of the observing awareness from all the other mental functions is not accomplished until these functions have "stopped", that is, stopped exercising a conditional impact on the awareness! In meditative settings, when sensorial perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and memories, have at least stopped eliciting conditioned responses, the experiencer of these forms of cessation now understands these functions and relates to them differently than before, when their functioning and impact was beyond his control or even capacity to observe clearly and vividly. *Anatta*, the absence of subjectivity, as an experience and not just as a concept, arises naturally out of this *witnessing* of the cessation of one's own fundamental mental functions in meditation,

and which do not lead to death or madness, but only realisation of the hollowness and insubstantiality of one's entire mental world. After this point, only *habit* will cause one to continue to act on the bases of emotion and submit to evolutionary or cognitive conditioned responses to sensorial stimuli. In more simple words: when the impact of the mind on the consciousness, intuition, and awareness, is calmed or stopped, the intuition becomes then at least *capable* of independence from mental functions in ways so much similar to the independence of the physicist from the external object which he is scrutinising.

Such is the difference between Buddhist and western approaches, both of which have their own rigour as sciences, yet follow two different paths. *Objectivity* in Buddhism is not based on the denial of subjective experience and introspection, nor seeks its support in the findings of conceptualisation and technological tools capable of brain-mapping, but it is rather based on immersing the attention, intuition and awareness, in the observation of subjective functions and processes, while at the same time regarding them (objectifying them) as alien phenomena. This shows the extent by which evolutionary science may be of the utmost importance to the effective understanding and furtherance of Buddhist psychology; one of the highest achievement of the ancient Indian civilisation, and which offers an astonishingly profound and comprehensive explanation of the natural forces, causes, effects, and correlating conditions, which finally induce and mobilise the living being on the sensorial, emotional, and cognitive levels. This is so because, in the course of a process of teaching in a teleological soteriological context, there finally emerged in the teachings of the Buddha an understanding of motivation in human that is abstracted from any teleology; the observation of the natural laws which mobilise the human being in this way or that, and which has a lot to offer to anyone interested in the study of human mind and psychology in general.

Finally, the theoretical understanding presented here ought be regarded as one which falls short, in quite a marked manner, in giving a full description of the Buddhist path of practice, which as far as I could tell, involves experiences that go far beyond any theory and are difficult even to describe in words. The Buddha's teachings, when applied in practice, will bring the consciousness of the individual to meet with the roots of his own existence, and moreover, will equip him with the courage and purpose with

which to begin to shake those roots! The consequences of this are very strange and curious, what the mind is, and what it is capable of doing! No theory can encompass that, and no culture, possesses the language with which to communicate with any degree of effectiveness about experiences of that sort, indeed perhaps also because they are not grasped with the conceptualising mind, but only with the most nimble and sharp form of intuition that does not grasp anything, but only embraces what it experiences, or else, penetrates through it. It is my duty here to state that this applies to the phenomena of motivation and effort just as well, and which roots, indeed, are as much deeply dug in the fabric of existence as are the very mysterious origins of life itself! A systematic theory however is of great usefulness, in that it reveals the laws and principles of nature according to which all human motivation and effort flows, as well as their psychological ramifications – the understanding of which is a great gain in and of itself, to all those who are of the type that wonders: what is human, and why is he the way he is?

1. What Nature Does to Us

1.1 Fear

"What are we to make of creation in which routine activity is for organisms to be tearing others apart with teeth of all types - biting, grinding flesh, plant stalks, bones between molars, pushing the pulp greedily down the gullet with delight, incorporating its essence into one's own organization, and then excreting with foul stench and gasses residue. Everyone reaching out to incorporate others who are edible to him. The mosquitoes bloating themselves on blood, the maggots, the killer-bees attacking with a fury and a demonism, sharks continuing to tear and swallow while their own innards are being torn out."

—Ernest Becker (1973)

*A creature,
Having been born in the world,
Fears nothing
More than to suffer.*

—Paṭhamajana-sutta

Fear, pain, and screaming! Rightly, this is where the whole story begins!



Obviously there is something quite shocking in the experience of coming out of the womb! This is how it all starts, with precisely these rather intense negative emotions and aversive convulsions. What is it that makes the infant so uncompromisingly averse? Why does a smile, or even neutrality, fails him or her in this entrance upon life?

The infant is so small and barely self-conscious in any meaningful way, yet not only is he already experiencing suffering, but he fears it; he already fears to suffer. It seems clear that there is already much pain merely in becoming conscious of the bodily condition in which we humans find ourselves born. It is the advent of consciousness, the sentience of the body and of its automatic, unceasing sensitivity and receptivity to everything in the environment; *feeling* them, without options or possibilities of escape from this relentless experience of sensorial contact. This is how the body continually knows the environment on a momentary basis, by being constantly receptive and open to feel everything that surrounds it. And though as we grow up we eventually normalise with such constantly sensitive nature of the body, for an infant, I imagine, the very first moments of becoming conscious of it and of its receptivity to stimuli, must be heartbreakingly painful, if not even traumatising!

This is it, then: Birth, is our first trauma! And more than being just a traumatising event, it is such as has very serious ramifications and consequences! But again, it is only that we normalise with all of this, because we know, whether consciously or unconsciously, that there simply are no options or ways out here. If something was to live, it must at first be born; nobody sees the trouble in all that; and despite of the baby's severe screaming and convulsions, nobody sees the terrible pain that is inherent in the event of birth itself, and in its consequences. Rather everyone is celebrating, because it is customarily believed, probably also unconsciously, that any form of existence is better than to not exist at all! We never really ask ourselves serious questions about the event of birth, but most of us just instinctively feel as if babies come to existence from nothing aside from biological processes, and bring joy and happiness to their parents and family; we seldom think about how hard this experience of “coming to existence” must be for the baby, and how all of it is unchosen also!

The thing about trauma is that it is so painful as an event to the extent that it teaches the experiencer to fear and avoid its repetition at all costs. Trauma downloads this fear in the core hard-drive of the deepest layer of human psyche; it is evidently an evolutionary mechanism, and one that is essential for survival. And indeed, one may be nonchalant or carefree regarding the hypothetical possibility of being bitten by a snake, simply because he has never been ever bitten before – but grows so persistent and

even obsessive the fear of snakes by one who actually suffered a bite just once before, as the recollection of the terribly painful experience remains vivid in memory! Fear must correspond to the cause of pain: We fear a scorpion because it is the thing that stings, we fear fire because it is the thing that burns, and we fear a thought because it is the thing that stimulates a bad desire and action, and so on! What then, does the infant so readily fear? What has he experienced a moment after birth, that evoked so much horror in his being?!

It is *life* and *living*! It is *experiencing*, experiencing *anything*! Having become conscious, having become alive, having become susceptible to feel things; just that is where all pain comes from. A scorpion's sting, getting burned, or following an evil desire, are only different forms of pain, each with its corresponding cause – but whence comes the fundamental, original *capacity* to feel pain in the first place, to feel anything? It comes right from being alive in a sentient body! Thus, all further traumas issue from this first trauma of birth, just as fear of certain specific pains issue from and is subordinate to fear of pain in general; fear of being *hurt*.

We may be able to see the picture more fully if we were to contemplate what fear has done to the sentient being, what impact it had on it, and how it has shaped and fashioned its very body and behaviour. We may take up the variety of defence mechanisms which have spontaneously evolved in the multitude of creatures, as objects of contemplation, and with view to the original, fundamental condition of their existence, which is fear of danger and hurt, and obsession with safety. Take for example the development of sharp spines in hedgehogs and porcupines, covering most of their outer body, and then the development of venom glands in some creatures, and how a scorpion's tail, equipped with a piercing barb and powerful capacity of rapid reflex movement, allows the needle to penetrate to the bloodstream of the victim before it could withdraw. Carnivores have developed a set of two fangs or canines in both their upper and lower jaws, allowing a snake, for example, to clutch the body of the victim and to prevent it from withdrawing aback before the venom flows from its mouth into the victim's bloodstream through the freshly open wound, resulting immediately in severe nervous and physiological dysfunction, paralysis, and possibly death.

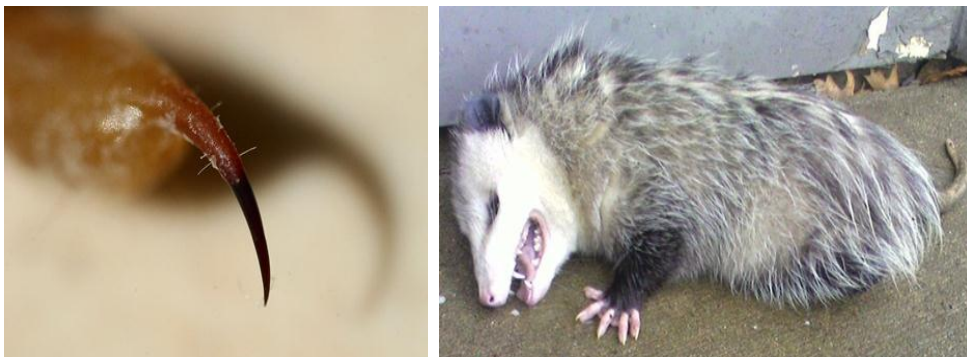


Figure 1: The fundamental and intrinsic fear of suffering manifests itself readily in the evolution of adaptive defence mechanisms on the physiological and psychological levels. The first image shows a scorpion's barb, and the second shows the fangs of an opossum that leaves its mouth open as it feigns being dead.

The creature itself is unaware of most of this; it only acts, its reactionary aggression being stimulated by fear of danger. The consciousness and behaviour of the creature is thus subordinate and conditioned by fear on both psychological and physiological levels, and independently from the awareness, desire, or will of the creature itself. Stimulated by fear of a certain object, once its presence becomes cognised by the senses, the subsequent behaviour of the creature is entirely conditioned by nature, and is often limited only to two options: fight-or-flight – and even when an opossum, for example, opts for a third option, that of feigning death, its physiology follows immediately and automatically: its heart rate drops and respiration grows faint, the mouth opens and the tongue sticks out, and it starts urinating and defecating involuntarily so that the foul smell may repel the approaching predator or suppress its appetite for food or curiosity to explore the now seemingly dead and decomposed prey!

The Buddhist concept of *tanhā* or "desire" is often classified as craving for pleasure and aversion to pain; but at a closer look we might find that we crave pleasure only to avoid pain, in that the absence of pleasure does not represent to us anything other than the advent of pain. You could flip every craving into its corresponding aversion, and vice versa, and you will find fear of pain at the centre of both: aversion to danger is a craving for safety, and craving to food is an aversion to hunger, and so on. Fear, thus, is at the foundation even of *craving*; and it is precisely the force which mobilises the creature to crave food and seek it. The horror which strikes a creature due to

the scarcity of food and nourishment could be greater than that which befalls it upon contact with a predator, and it may lead to higher levels of aggressive responses, pushing the starving animal to embark on desperate attempts of hunting, exposing its life to serious or fatal danger in the process.

This rather dark and disturbing picture about not merely the conditioned reality of the sentient being, but also the *manner* by which it is conditioned, says a lot also about our natural state of human existence! It is only that we have been living for too long mostly apart from these original, natural conditions of life and survival to the extent that we now look at these animalistic conditions of life with amusement and amazement, though, as we shall soon see, the fundamental evolutionary mechanisms which thus fashion and mobilise the animal are still fully functioning in the depth of our human hearts, even if they now manifest in forms far more sophisticated and subtle than those of the animalistic pursuit of pleasure and escape from pain.

1.2 Lust

"The soberest conclusion that we could make about what has actually been taking place on the planet about three billion years is that it is being turned into a vast pit of fertilizer."

—Ernest Becker (1973)

"What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel work of nature!"

—Charles Darwin

One of the most fascinating episodes in the development of life was the gradual evolution of the "senses". We can clearly see that those creatures which developed more senses have become more adaptive, and we can discern the gradual development of the senses through the history of life, one sense after another across the various species: starting with the touch, which is tightly connected with the development of motor capacities, going through smelling and tasting, hearing and sight, and all the way up to the development of abstraction and the imagination. A creature that can touch and smell what's around it is better able to discern its environment than one which could only touch things, and further, a creature that can also see is better able to respond to both dangers and opportunities in the environment than one which can only touch and smell, and so forth. Such gradual development of the senses reveals that the cosmological *plan* of life aimed at, or was designed in such a way as to diversify the sources of experience and information about the environment for the benefit of the living creature, and further, so that they may cumulatively enable it to identify both dangers and opportunities in the environment from an increasing distance, affording it at once with the two advantages of an early escape from an approaching danger and higher capacity to spot more opportunities of hunting or foraging. Thus, a fox that cannot see its prey may well be able to hear its footsteps from an impressive distance, and with the development of two ears, it can identify its location with astounding precision. The fox depends on the same senses to detect the approach of a predator, hearing with the ears what it cannot see with the eyes. But picture the exact same fox having lost its capacity to see and hear, it can now survive only by resorting to smelling and touching

what's around it, a condition which instantly reduces its capacity to discern the environment and makes it far more susceptible to predation and starvation. It is very unlikely that this fox will survive much longer in wilderness!

Social structures and hierarchies of many various sorts were developed naturally in the animal kingdom for the same reasons, minimising dangers and maximising opportunities. The most basic principle here being that the strongest and smartest of the pack, an alpha male, takes full control of the organisation of social affairs and dominates all its members, placing itself both at the top and the centre of the social group, in exchange for being in the forefront of battle when confrontation with another pack or other species occurs, or leading an effective escape that even the weakest in the pack will be able to execute. The pack's leader knows where the important natural resources are and when is the right time to access them. It signals the cues to the members of the pack instructing them about what to do and how to respond to all sorts of unexpected or unusual stimuli which they come across in the course of their wild life. Further systems and functions of social organisation and relationships develop among the various members of the social group, with marked and consistent variations and divisions along the lines of gender and age.

This social existence of the sentient creature, and mostly of mammals in particular, introduces a new more sophisticated dimension of fear and desire, the actions, reactions, and interactions of each individual in which are exactly as much spontaneously formed and conditioned as physiological responses are to the various environmental stimuli. These natural and innate social conditioners are the ones which, for example, compel a mother to *feel* possessive and caring for its new-born (craving), and likewise compel a new-born to cry and scream should the mother go absent (aversion). Other forms of social fears and desires are *learned*, whether they be of a transitory utility (like weaning the young through punishing their impulse to suckle), or permanent (like obeying the alpha male, "unless you can beat him down!"). In the case of human, social desires and fears take many further sophisticated forms, such as social status, intimacy and love, cruelty and vengeance, sports and religion, and as I will discuss in the following chapter, they may possibly go so far as to become a stimulus for such human inclinations as are contradictory with the designs of nature.

This fabulous and mysterious work of nature to enhance and reinforce the safety and health of the living creature, through physical, psychological, and social adaptive mechanisms, poses a simple and significant question: what is the purpose of all this? To what end? What is it that nature, as a transcendental sphere and force here, seeks to accomplish by all that?

I may be accused here of anthropomorphising nature, depicting it as something that has some purpose or goal to which it strives. But however you wish to call it, what's being referred to here, and generally throughout this book, is strictly the actual, demonstrable, undeniable, cumulative impact of nature in the historical record of life on earth, precisely in how such manifests in the behaviour of species. And whether or not some kind of transcendental *intending* force exists behind it, this fascinating progression of sensorial, emotional, and social life, is a fact that readily validates the question as to whether it has any end or purpose beyond itself, that is, beyond enhancing the power of the living organism and nothing more; a perspective in which *benevolence* would be the appropriate corresponding anthropomorphism!

Ancient Indian cosmology provides a fascinating answer to this question: *Samsara!* The ancient Indian idea of "nature" does not regard death as a finality, but rather as an event which only leads on to a further life. Thus nature is depicted as an eternally whirling wheel, a continuum of space-time that not only affords the possibility of life, but also enhances it, through which the consciousness having materialised and vanished through the life and death of one creature here, reappears and vanishes again there through the life and death of another creature, and so on, eternally. But in order for the consciousness to transmigrate and rematerialise eternally in the world, sexual fertilisation and conception must happen, and likewise, they must happen ceaselessly! *Procreation!* (fig. 2)

Whether or not this ancient Indian cosmological picture appeal to the intuition and reasoning of the reader, it seems rational still to come to the conclusion that sexual reproduction may well be the ultimate natural goal in relation to which all evolutionary mechanisms are subordinate, that is to say, the creatures are being empowered physically, psychologically, and socially, in order to be better able to reproduce safely, and possibly as many times as possible before they die. This offers an explanation of the evolutionary utility



Figure 2: The Wheel of Nature or Samsara through which the consciousness traverses across endless lives, being in the clutch of "Māra", the anthropomorphism of Nature itself or the benefactor of Nature, which feeds on the endless cycle of life and death and rebirth, afforded by procreation which is symbolised by the constant whirling of the Wheel. Mara is shown in the Pāli text as obsessed with ensuring that the consciousness is retained within Samsara and does not leave it, which is what salvation is in Buddhist cosmology, and Māra is declared "defeated" or "triumphant" as a human being succeeds or fails in thus liberating the consciousness from the clutches of Māra and out of Samsara. This Buddhist cosmological view of nature declares as unfathomable or unknowable *why* nature came to operate in such *teleological* manner, where every function and process in it seem so intimately devoted to the goal of procreation and the perpetuation of life – declaring only that such cyclic existence is both primordial and eternal.

of social structures, where the various adaptive social fears and desires, which are categorically only seldom existentially threatening or advantageous, and which nevertheless constitute the most part of the life of mammals, are intimately connected with facilitating mating and reproduction. Further evidence of the paramount station of procreation is found most visibly in *lust*, the relentless emotional pursuit of sexual gratification through the compulsive desire for the act of sexual reproduction, being possibly the most profound and dominating impulse of all creatures, and even when the process of sexual fertilisation or birth-giving involves life-threatening risks or sure death for one of the parents, as is the case in certain types of fish and spiders. The phenomenon of death itself, materialising in the inevitable degeneration of body cells, seem to have arisen for no reason other than to suppress the threatening mutative impact of these cells on the efficacy of the reproductive system, had they lasted indefinitely without end.⁴ In other words, had it been not for procreation, it

⁴ William R. Clark (1996). *Sex and the Origins of Death*. Oxford University Press.

is possible that nature would not have developed any fatal cell-degeneration and therewith, no death of creatures! Just as in the Indian cosmological picture, so too in biology do we find procreation, life, and death, so inseparably intertwined to the extent that we cannot but admit how the endless propagation of this very cycle *in general*, has been prioritised over the preservation of precisely the life of the individual organism in particular. Ernest Becker mentions that this relationship manifests further in how the human individual seeks to transcend death precisely through progeny, in the begetting of which the individual conceives an idea of the propagation of his own life beyond death.⁵ In all cases, given such crushing sacrificing of the individual organism for the sake of the propagation of the species to which it belongs, we can as Darwin did, rule out "benevolence" as the appropriate anthropomorphism of nature!

⁵ Ernest Becker (1975). *Escape from Evil*. Free Press.

1.3 Oblivion

*Tricked by their own minds
Amused in the dominion of Death
The oblivious creatures run
Across incalculable lives of the world.
—Guttātherīgāthā*

We have seen how the devices and designs of nature function in such a way as to mobilise the living creature through conditioned responses to what it experiences through the senses. We have seen that the creature is motivated or spurred to act always in a reactionary fashion, by such deep and fundamental emotions as fear and lust, which are the very foundation of the animal's psychological makeup. We have also seen how physiological and psychological conditions are tightly connected together in their functioning as a holistic body-mind system that enables the animal to remain safe and healthy, thus capable of mating and procreation. Further we have seen how social structures emerge as effective means of maximising safety, minimising danger or vulnerability, and finally facilitating social contact and mating.

In this story about this most basic or fundamental layer of natural motivators of feeling, emotion and behaviour, there are two dimensions of suffering and misery! The first is that which the creature directly feels as pain, not just that of illness, injury, or any kind of bodily discomfort, but also the psychological, which manifests in the gross emotions and states of mind associated with fear, anxiety, and restlessness, given the constant *prospect* of predation or starvation, or also possible conflicts and domination-dynamics in the social environment. The second, more subtle and profound dimension of suffering, is what the Pāli text refers to as *avijjā*: it is not experienced by the creature, nor is it normally experienceable in any direct way; it refers to the *oblivion* and blindness of the creature to its own conditioned reality, its incapacity to perceive the forces of nature which condition its emotional and behavioural responses, in this or that way, or even to recognise fear as fear and lust as lust. In this situation of oblivion, the animal perceives nothing beyond what manifests to its senses; its subsequent emotion and behaviour is unconscious to it. When it senses an object it instantly and spontaneously

feels an emotion, and when it feels an emotion it instantly and spontaneously acts based on that emotion (*phassa* → *vedanā/tanhā* → *upādāna*); it is unable to modify or interfere with this process or even recognise its occurrence. It is this profound condition of oblivious suffering that concerns us most here.

Unlike the case in human, such oblivion encompasses the entirety of the animal's consciousness, and makes it appear to our human understanding as a creature living not only in constant suffering and constant fear of suffering, but also constant oblivion and blindness, as if it was permanently trapped in its preconditioned and predetermined reality, while being cheated to think that its reality was no prison and that no need exists for liberation and emancipation, because it cannot even see its suffering and how it happens. Thus oblivion is not only that which arises in relation to one's fundamental suffering, but more importantly to the *conditioned nature* of one's entire existence. Nature manipulates the strings, but the living creature, just like a marionette, cannot see neither the strings nor the manipulation nor the manipulator; it identifies with its *moves* as if they were its own, coming from its independent will. It identifies with its urges and impulses rather than finds itself estranged and alienated from them. It never wonders "where do they come from?" or "why do I act on their basis?" The animal cannot think that way. It naturally and instinctively regards all that it experiences and does, as something that originates from and belongs to itself rather than to nature. Precisely that condition of not-seeing and not-knowing, is what's meant by '*a-vijja*.'

Oblivion is thus an *original transcendental force*, a fundamental condition that is inseparable from nature, life, and the world of organic and conditioned manifestations. Quite remarkably similarly to Gnostic cosmology, which attributes the genesis of the world of manifestation to the malevolent Demiurge, the transcendental "maker", "artificer", or "fabricator"; Buddhist cosmology places *avijjā* or Oblivion precisely as the origin of "*sankhāra*", a word which means "putting together" or "making", and which, at variance with traditional interpretations, refers likewise to the entirety of the world of manifestation and everything in it, including life and the sentience through which forms are perceived. This vital idea which we find shared in these two great cosmological traditions, attempts to account for "the human condition", or for *viññāna* in more Buddhist terms; the

animal-like sentience and consciousness, in transcendental cosmological origins.⁶



Figure 3: Depictions of the Gnostic Demiurge [left] and Buddhist Māra [right], both of which are mythical representations of the creation of the material world of forms and manifestations, and also the oblivious consciousness and desirous ego which compels the living creature to identify with its body and its sensorial cognition of the manifest world, and to regard such experience as "home" or "I" or "me", and thereby remains trapped inside it. Thus, similarly to the Gnostic Demiurge, Māra is sometimes called *Gahakāraka* or "home-builder", and Samsara, the world, and nature, are sometimes referred to as "*Māradheyya* or *Māravisaya*", meaning "Māra's realm or dominion".

Thus both the world of forms and the sentience which perceives and reacts to its sensorial manifestations are being regarded as *sankhāra* or *conjured* or *made-up things*, and Oblivion materialises and thrives through both these worlds, the cosmic and the sentient. This corresponds well with Indian psychology, which is devoid of ontological inquiries regarding any abstract or ultimate "reality" existing beyond what is strictly *experienced*. That is to say, no distinction exists between these mythological and cosmological symbols or archetypes, and their corresponding ideational and sensorial manifestations in the psychological experience. This offers the chance for us to escape the possible confusion which is usually caused by an overly *conceptualised* interpretation of cosmological genesis narratives (such as that we already find in the traditional interpretations of the purport of "sankhāra"). In other words, what matters is to be able to identify *avijjā* or

⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons mentions the following in his *Adversus Haereses* (CE. 180: I:5): "Having thus formed the world, the Demiurge also created the earthly man [...] and then afterwards, as [Gnostics] define the process, breathed into him the animal part of his nature."

Oblivion in psychological terms, as it manifests through its impact on the experienceable and observable functioning of the consciousness, manifesting in the creature's self-identification with its sensorial experience, and in its sense of belonging and attachment to precisely this world of manifestation and nature, including particularly its own body and its sensorial and hedonic experience, which finally results in its unconscious obedience to natural motivators and desires, such as fear and lust, and further secures its oblivion and blindness regarding this very circumstance of imprisonment and servitude, and the suffering it begets, and the possibility of liberation therefrom. So much fundamental is that original oblivion to the extent that, without it, the conditioned experience of the creature would appear to its consciousness and perception as a strange, unpleasant, painful, and unbearable *outsider*. And that original oblivion is precisely the force which makes the consciousness not only totally unaware of its conditioned existence, but also tricks it into experiencing it as something that is completely familiar, taken for granted, loved and cherished beyond all other things, and identified with the very *self*.⁷

We have seen how Māra is depicted as a mythological creature that feeds on the perpetual propagation of the multitude of streams of consciousness, as they whirl about purposelessly and endlessly through the cycle of life and death and rebirth; a need which it secures for itself precisely through the continual oblivion of the many living creatures. The very expression "gnosis" reveals the extent by which Gnosticism is highly concerned with a similar understanding of human oblivion, and similarly to Buddhism it identifies salvation as precisely the deliverance from such oblivion which happens by means of gnosis. This mirrors the highly important Buddhist concept of *pañña*; a transcendental form of intuitive discernment to which we generically refer as "wisdom", and which is the force that leads to *ñāna* or Buddhist gnosis. However in Buddhism such gnosis is a *spectrum* the experience of which is gradual and cumulative, and its birth or inception in

⁷ In truth, Venerable Ñānavīra was not the only one to emphasize the importance of developing an experiential, psychological understanding of the *Patīccasamuppāda* and of the cosmological roots of the human condition. In the *Nagara-sutta* (SN 12.65) for example, the Buddha himself states that he saw *sankhāra* directly only after he had already (that is, experientially) transcended the conditioned consciousness. Thus, and just as is the case with "nibbāna" or salvation itself, whatever understanding we might have of "sankhāra" differs from that realised by the Buddha in that we are reaching out to it with yet a conditioned consciousness that has not yet discerned its conditional roots *in experience*.

the consciousness happens at the same moment as it finally sees and understands its own conditioned and enveloped nature, like a marionette that finally awakens to the strings.⁸ We shall later see how this gnosis does not on its own lead directly to final deliverance, and how nature continues to operate within our hearts through sheer momentum of habit even after we have discerned the strings with which it mobilises us. But the vital importance of this first moment of gnosis lies in that every further and subsequent substantial and effective motivation and effort toward salvation, springs directly from it and is impossible without it.⁹

Both the Gnostic Demiurge and Buddhist Māra are associated with *death*, and the very semantic meaning of the word "Māra" is nothing but "death-bringer" or simply "death", aside from other epithets of it which we find across the text, such as "*maccurāja*" or "King of Death", which clearly establishes this relationship. "Samael", on the other hand, which is an alternative name of the Demiurge, denoting "Blind God", is found in Judeo-Christian cosmology to represent the angel of death. Such intimate connections with death point at a further dimension of oblivion; its *result*: a wasteful life that has only death as its terminus, and which squanders to naught whatever that was accomplished or hoarded throughout an oblivious life and living. The thing about death is that it is the one event in our observable experience which brings us closest to the edge of our mundane existence, and exposes our consciousness directly to the dark unfathomable abyss of the transcendental realm, and of what exists beyond death. It is for this reason that we find all this profound and highly symbolic mythological

⁸ In secular terms this corresponds to the idea of the transformation of self-awareness, as in "learning and unlearning" regarding self-view in the psychoanalytic thought of Otto Rank for example, or as that which leads to "growth" or "flourishing" in the terms of positive psychology.

⁹ In this context it is perhaps apt to contemplate the similarities between the Buddhist and Gnostic emphasis on gnosis or the transcendence of blindness and oblivion, through the following strikingly similar passages:

"You are exposed, home-builder. I have attained the destruction of desire. My heart has reached the unconditioned state. You can no longer build another home; for all of your rafters have been broken; your ridgepole pounded to pieces." — *Dhammapada* 154.

"You are mistaken, Samael (=Demiurge). There is an immortal man of light who has been in existence before you, and who will appear among your modeled forms; he will trample you to scorn, just as potter's clay is pounded." — Anon. *Nag Hammadi Gnostic manuscripts*. Tr. Hans-Gehard Bethge and Bentley Layton. The Gnostic Society Library.

and cosmological material involved with the examination of consciousness and sentience.

But, in truth, if we were to return to the field of empirical and demonstrable scientific observation, we will find these close connections between oblivion, sentience or sensorial consciousness, and death, to manifest even more vividly than in these colourful mythological and cosmological descriptions; perhaps most vividly in the phenomenon of *phenoptosis*, whereby an individual organism is killed through its own nature for the benefit of the growth of its species at large. For example, certain types of bacteria are wired by nature to self-destruct the moment they become infected by a virus, so as to prevent the spread of the infection to other bacteria. This same mechanism evolves into a *behavioural* rather than autonomic biological or cellular functioning in the phenomenon of *autothysis*, Greek for "self-sacrifice", which is most commonly found in ants and termites that detonate a gland in their bodies, like suicide bombers, in order to avert predation, killing themselves in the process. Further examples of this behaviour can be found in more complex forms in mammals and humans.

In all of these examples of the *sacrificial lamb* we see one thing: that the life of a creature is never the goal, but only a means; a means to something which exists beyond the life and consciousness of the individual organism. This greater goal is nothing other than the perpetuation, propagation, reinforcement, and augmentation of this great festival of life, indeed just as if some transcendental entity out there is benefiting from it one way or another, and which somehow empowers nature to instruct the individual creature to expose itself to death, or even to kill itself, when the propagation of life *in general* requires it. In these examples the oblivion of the individual creature manifests not only in how it knows not why it was born and why it lives, but also in how, given the materialisation of certain conditions, it likewise finds itself mobilised toward an untimely death, which only appears to be willed or intentional, but which causes are as much unknown to the creature as are those which have begotten it to life in the first place. In both its attachment to life and impulse to sacrifice its life, the oblivious creature is unaware of the force which mobilises it to thus live and thus die.

This finally makes us ask the question about human acts in general, and those of sacrifice in particular, which we so glorify and to which we dedicate many a high place in art and literature – whether they are really willed and chosen, or whether they are only more sophisticated forms of oblivion that are, in essence, identical to those which mobilise the animal?

2. Human Transcends Nature

Where what was discussed in the preceding chapter applies in its entirety, to an extent or another, to the life of humans just as it does to animals; the following is a discussion which, though continues to refer to evolutionary mechanisms that we share with animals, yet aims at shedding light more specifically on the "human condition", which is unique and enigmatic in so many ways that are lacking in animals.

The development of imaginative, abstractive, linguistic, and self-consciousness capacities in human has exercised a radical transformation of the manner with which he reacts to natural motivators and desires, and not only in relationship to the environment, but also and most significantly in relation to his own existence and life in the environment. These mental developments are in every way very mysterious and enigmatic. The evolutionary foundation of the development of abstraction can be vividly seen in mammals, and in its most basic form, it is only hardly distinguishable from emotion and intelligence. So the toddler bear, following closely behind his siblings and mother, stops before a very tiny and shallow running stream of water that the rest of the family have already and easily crossed. It *imagines* this tiny stream to be dangerous although it is not, and the signs of agitation appear clearly in its bodily behaviour as it hesitates to move on. This is an evolutionary form of imaginative fear which arises in relation to new experiences with unknown results. But on the other side of the tiny stream the mother can wait no more; she goes ahead as if nonchalant about leaving the toddler behind, clearly knowing that by so doing the little one will be spurred to overcome its fear of the stream by the greater fear of becoming separated from its mother. Imagination appears also in the mother's sound intuition of the effective impact and result of her phony act. By the time we get to chimpanzees, an impressive manifestation of the imagination will be demonstrated in the animal's capacity to understand emotional and ideational symbols, including certain elements of human speech, and to use sign language by a limited extent. But despite of all this, the story of imagination is yet so radically different in human.

Though it is self-evidently clear what kind of evolutionary advantages such mental developments afford to the safety and health of the human

organism, as they have revolutionised his command over natural dangers and resources, and allowed for an astoundingly more sophisticated systems of socioeconomic organisation on massive scales – nevertheless it seems that the development of certain aspects of abstraction, self-awareness in particular, may not be so easily explainable as an evolutionary adaptive mechanism, since they have also enabled human to finally transcend nature itself, by discerning how it works and what effects it exercises on his life; thus directly allowing human to break free, at least to some extent, from the total oblivion of the animal, and to pursue unnatural ends and do things in unnatural ways, which as we shall soon see, will nearly become the norm for human, or perhaps his own primary nature.

It is possible to speculate that, evolution being itself a deaf and blind process, a natural system that functions according to intrinsic laws, may have inevitably resulted in the production of abstraction for evolutionary adaptive reasons to enhance the safety and health of the human organism, just as it always did, but self-awareness, being itself a form of abstraction, was only a coincidental by-product of that evolutionary process – just as gravity, despite of being a fundamental force of material existence, is yet no *purpose* of physical nature, but only a corollary of the very existence of matter in space-time. As we have seen, religions tend strongly toward a cosmological explanation of the genesis of consciousness, and Gnostics and Hindus are not the only ones to regard self-awareness so highly, as a gift from God, even a flickering beam of His own wisdom or omniscience that was instilled in every human for the highest benevolent purpose, without which no gnosis or salvation would ever be possible. And even in other Indian traditions where no such cosmo-genesis of self-awareness is provided, we often find "*the knower*" as that which constitutes human's mental essence.¹⁰ We will not find any such similar idea of the cosmological genesis of self-awareness in the Pāli Buddhist texts, as such conflicts with the Buddhist principle of *anatta* or the absence of any form of ontological essence; a framework in which self-awareness emerges as no more than a

¹⁰ For example we find the following in the Jain *Akaranga Sutra*, I:5.5.5: "The Self is the knower (or experiencer), and the knower is the Self. That through which one knows, is the Self. With regard to this (to know) it (the Self) is established. Such is he who maintains the right doctrine of Self." *Jaina Sutras*. Tr. Hermann Jacobi, Sacred Books of the East. vol. 22. Oxford: The Clarendon Press. 1884.

conditioned mental function or process just like all other mental processes. Nevertheless, as we shall see later, the emphasis on such self-awareness processes in Buddhist psychology is just as great as it is in those other doctrines, to the extent that it is regarded as the primary means of gnosis and salvation in both psychological and cosmological terms.

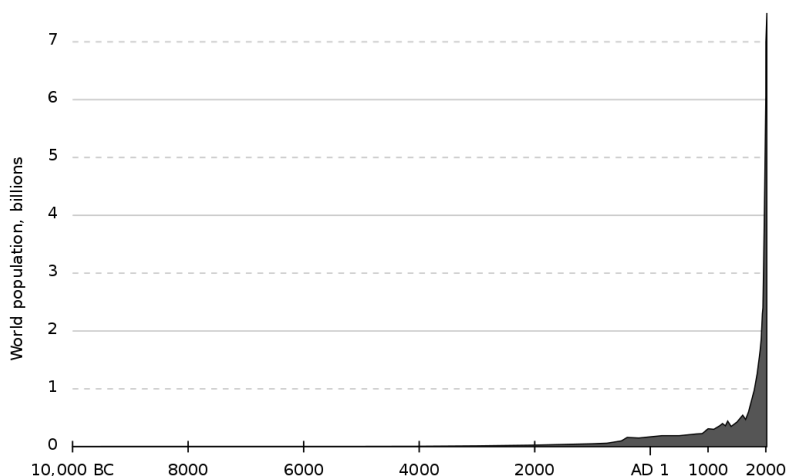
Whatever the case may be regarding the genesis of abstraction and self-awareness, all of which is only a matter of speculation or belief, but no certainty; we cannot but acknowledge as true and real the paradigm-shifting impact of these mental capacities in the history of life, as they manifest in the behaviour of humans both individually and socially, and in the massive, non-stop, and accelerating progression of technological advancement which in every way contrasts with the slow and gradual work of nature itself and its evolutionary creativity. The question which is of the highest relevance to us at this point is: how did these higher mental capacities transform human's relationship with nature and his own functioning in it?

The above-mentioned human command on the conditions of nature, which is made possible by the development of abstraction and linguistic capacities, which revolutionised ideation and creativity on the one hand, and social communication and collaboration on the other, quickly removed human so far away from the animal condition and resulted in a situation unseen before in nature: The human organism is no longer constantly subject to the threat of predation or starvation, and moreover, the sources of natural dangers have been mostly controlled, and food produced in abundance. This situation, of course, was a gradual process, but it was also incredibly fast-paced, and we continue to witness its development today and are continually affected by its rather dazzling impact. There manifests in this long story of human socioeconomic and technological development one of the most important intrinsic features of human existence: his increasing alienation from nature and the concomitant confusion or perplexity which such alienation begets. We shall now examine this most important phenomenon, and see how the more grew human's dependence on his higher cognitive capacities, the more he, unlike all animals, became hesitant, uncertain, alienated and confused with regard to his experience of existence.

2.1 The Imagination (Moha)

We may begin by looking at the most direct result of environmental control: the gradual numerical increase of the human population throughout ancient times, and which finally witnessed a massive explosion after the industrial revolution, and continues to grow. Aside perhaps solely from bacteria, krill, and ants, and similar such creatures which reproduction is both massive and frequent, and which unfolds in environments which can support their expansive consumption of energy – no animal population could ever grow to such an extent as human did without mass starvation and death, and the only reason chickens, cattle and sheep count by the billions is nothing other than that they are being domesticated, fed and protected by human! The populations of the wild counterparts of these domesticated species have been rather declining rapidly, and various kinds of birds will very often ditch a hatching egg or two in order to ensure the survival of the rest, and if they don't, should the older chick senses the scarcity of food in its own malnutrition and hunger, it will take it upon itself to kill the siblings which hatch after it! Socioeconomic organisation of the human masses then became a matter of survival, and every ancient civilisation in human history began precisely from the point of a successful and effective such organisation. Yet given human's only limited economic freedom from the sway of nature in those ancient times, human also resolved to the practice of *infanticide*, which was so widespread in those times to the extent that its absence in any given society was the rare exception rather than the norm.

Figure 4:
Human
population
across history.



A *political* system of rule and governance then becomes the most vital force that is responsible for the minimisation of dangers and provision of food, itself resembling in relation to the masses it governs at once either the possible protector and food-provider, or violent predator and incompetent famine-bringer. Human's concept of danger and experience of fear has gradually shifted to more abstract forms which are no longer directly and immediately connected with nature, and the punishing tyranny of the rulers, war, economic hardship, or political and social instability and collapse, become themselves the objects which evoke in human the direct and intuitive perception and experience of fear, and not necessarily because the individual discerns or intuits that such events entail further natural dangers such as starvation and death, but in themselves they spontaneously and directly represent to his emotive perception what the appearance of a predator represents to the prey, or what the appearance of the alpha male represents to those who are subservient to it.

This condition reveals to us the manner and extent by which human became increasingly dependent on the imagination, conceptualisation, and abstraction, in order to interact effectively with an increasingly complex socioeconomic reality and environment in which he finds himself born, and how his attentive faculties have become increasingly conditioned by such environment to focus on abstract forms of socioeconomic dangers and opportunities which are removed from the original natural concern for the immediate protection and nourishment of one's own physical body and those of the offspring, and nothing more. It is in this sense that we speak of the development of a "world-view" and "self-view" as things which human *experiences* rather than as mere ideas. Human here is perceiving reality, and interacting with it, not in a direct sensorial manner like the animal, but rather through the filter of the imagination which, as we have seen, is only another device of the artificer Demiurge, Māra, or Nature. And though the original evolutionary emotional mechanisms which mobilise the animal are still fully operating in the depth of human heart, and often spur the abstractive and imaginative faculties of the mind to guide the process of exploration and investigation of reality – yet the objects of such investigation have naturally become also increasingly abstract, such as political, economic, and social affairs, as opposed to safety and food – and so became also abstract and, *rationalised*, the motivations which emerged from such

conceptualised investigations, taking such forms as political, economic, and social participation, mobilisation and protest, as opposed to hunting, foraging, making weapons and building shelters.

The impact of this imaginative buffer separating the pristine consciousness and awareness from nature and reality is so great and pervasive, touching every aspect of human private and public life. About every behaviour that human does which animals do not, has its roots in the imagination. Being a creative and productive faculty rather than a functional tool with specific goals, the way emotions are for example; the imagination had to pervade and influence every aspect of human perception and behaviour, including those behaviours which were originally instinctive and identical with animals. And in as much as this obviously has its evolutionary uses and benefits, it also introduced a significant new element of *error* and *prejudice*, and also *excess* and *extremism*, in both human's evaluations of and interaction with reality, all of which was before that unknown in nature:

An animal may behave as if everything that is moving is potentially dangerous to it; this is an *evolutionary prejudice*, one that is instilled in the animal by nature in order to maximise its chances of safety and survival; an entirely *emotional* prejudice which the animal did not *learn*, and which could change only through a process of engineered or natural environmental conditioning. But only a human can regard things which don't even give rise to the emotion of fear as dangerous, such as to regard rain or thunder as "bad omens", or describe as dangerous a new law because it potentially undermines the independence of the judiciary! These forms of *aversions* represent a *learned conceptual prejudice* that is formed by the imagination; only later do they give rise to emotional reactions, if they ever do. Such conceptual prejudice dominates human evaluations and judgements in everyday life, and may very often be wrong or excessive, leading finally to one form or another of social violence. Further, escape from a predator may compel a mountain goat to risk a fatal jump over a steep cliff, but nothing other than the imagination will present a similar fatal jump to the mind of a free-climber as a pleasurable stimulating activity! Imagination here has not only functioned independently from evolutionary emotional conditions, but succeeded even in overriding them; a significant human development of which more will be discussed later. Thus, though fear as an absolute emotion is identical in the experience of both animals and humans, the imagination

not only rendered the objects of fear increasingly abstract in the perception of human, but also could create in human a perception of danger that was wholly conceptual and lacking any direct or immediate association with the emotion of fear, and finally could transform fear itself into something else, like excitement for example, or eliminate it altogether, in a situation that would otherwise naturally and necessarily elicit strictly fear and nothing else in other animals.



Figure 5:
The imagination is the one and the same faculty which creates such inclinations in the mind as persuade a human to hate people of colour and love a ride on a Ferris wheel!

As human resorted more frequently to this form of conceptual imagination in his evaluation and assessment of reality, the more grew the possibilities of error, prejudice, and excessiveness, and the more the mind became removed from nature, both that which exists within and without him. Unlike the animal, human now is interacting with something that only approximates reality; his own imagination is constantly (re)evaluating and (re)describing reality to his awareness, he no longer knows it independently from the imagination. And though at the beginning of the story of humanity the impact of the imagination may have been lesser in its intensity and pervasiveness, or perhaps restricted to certain types of phenomena that human could not encompass, given the primitive state of his knowledge and command of nature then – as mentioned earlier, that situation changed steadily and rapidly along with human's social and technological progress, resulting in the picture of humanity that we can see around us everywhere today.



Figure 6: Humanity! Whether in a village or city, in mountains or valleys, most human beings today are born in an environment which is removed from natural living and action, surrounded from all sides, since the very beginning of environmental consciousness in childhood, by a massive and dazzling socioeconomic situation that replaces nature in conditioning their attention, judgement, and motivation.

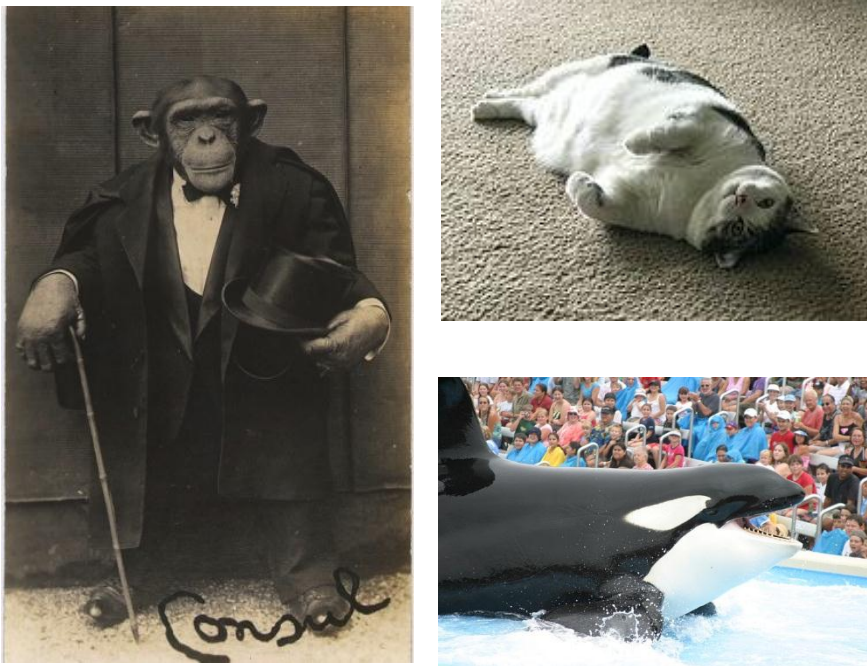


Figure 7: The impact of human life on animals.

But though conceptualisation and imagination lead to error and excess, they too are the faculties which lead to a sound discrimination or discernment, upon which human depends in his production and renewal of science and knowledge, and even to see his own conceptual and imaginative errors, prejudices, and faults; thus is the profound purport of the biblical genesis narrative of Adam and Eve, whose falling into oblivion and suffering is a direct result of eating from the tree of "knowledge", and who yet must now depend on the same capacity of knowledge in order to return to the grace of God. It is by means of the same power of abstraction that human could finally realise that rain and thunder do not entail any particular bad consequences, the judiciary's independence is still intact after the passage of the new law, and that the pain of the broken shoulder, along with the terribly high cost of the surgery to fix it, are sufficient reasons to come to the conclusion that free-climbing involves such risks as ought be avoided in the future. Hence, unlike the animal, this manifestation of conceptual trial and error to human's own consciousness results in a state of distrust, diffidence, and alienation with regard to *one's own* power of judgement and reasoning and all one's perspectives and ideas about world and self, much of which may affect the human psyche self-unconsciously. A further factor which fuels and reinforces this state of confusion and estrangement with regard to one's own experience is the fact that the imagination, unlike emotions, operates uniquely in every individual, which means that evaluations, opinions, and conclusions regarding reality, vary greatly across individuals, including intimately related ones, and in relation to the exact same situations which they experience together. This *subjective* variance with regard to reality, and which reflects itself in the life and living of individuals and in their daily interactions, exercises a significant further perplexing and alienating impact on the human psyche, which reinforces the impact of that already established through mistrust in one's own power of judgement.

This sense of estrangement with regard to reality which is visibly characteristic of human life has been the subject of much contemplation in western philosophy, which in the most general terms regarded it as an essential human condition which both stimulated its overcoming and led, in this way or that, to an individual or collective forms of human completeness or self-realisation. Western philosophers across history differed in their conceptual exploration of the causes of this alienation, as well as in what

constitutes its overcoming, yet the ignorance or ignoring of evolutionary science is precisely the one common feature which is shared by most of these varying western philosophical views of human alienation, including astonishingly contemporary postmodern interpretations! The Buddha on the other hand placed exclusive emphasis in his explanation of the *root cause* of human perplexity and alienation on individual cognitive phenomena, specifically the imagination, rather than historical, socioeconomic, political, or any such circumstantial mundane causes; the latter being regarded only as a corollary, a consequence or effect of the earlier.

This Buddhist stance represents the exact inverse of the materialist view of Marxism, which attributes human's sense of estrangement to such socioeconomic exploitation as alienates one from his fellow workers and his own productive work. This is a typical example of confusing the effect or symptom with the cause, as I have here argued that the various forms of socioeconomic control, including not only coercion or exploitation, but also more severe forms as infanticide, emerged spontaneously as a response to the urgent need to organise and sustain a mass population, which was itself a result of human's command on nature, and that being in turn a direct result of the radical evolution of the imagination and abstraction in the human mind. And though some will here argue that such necessary economic exploitation sustained or intensified, or one way or another added a *materialist dimension* to such original cognitive alienation – we find ourselves unable to explain how this could be true, given that social alienation has only intensified *after* the long era of feudal economy, which constituted a form of inequality and exploitation that far exceeded in its ferocity that which was introduced later by the industrial revolution and emergence of capitalism. That is to say, and contrary to the Marxist psychological understanding, human alienation increased as the intensity of socioeconomic inequality and exploitation decreased! We find many other identical examples of this pattern across all aspects of human's individual and social life, where the slightest improvement in human's quality of life seem to result directly in a higher level of estrangement, which is explained, as I will argue further below, by how such life-quality improvements allow for, if not even necessitate, a subsequent increased awareness, sensitivity, fear, and aversion with regard to suffering, while at the same time decrease oblivion or resilience to it.

Nor was there in the condition of inequality and exploitation anything particularly unnatural, novel or invented; for it does exist in our mammalian ancestors and for beneficial evolutionary purposes which I have briefly described above.¹¹ Forms of socioeconomic hierarchical organisation which involve a degree or another of coercion of the individual, including natural divisions along the lines of gender and age, do not in the least represent a cultural novelty that is divorced from nature and is the exclusive domain of the cruel human; rather the human society developed through a course that closely followed that of the chimp, and it was precisely its capacity to envisage itself in "cultural" settings that enabled it to depart from the cruelty of the chimp-world. Hence followed the various forms of life-quality improvements, materialising in less fear and drudgery and more safety and food, all of which afforded the individual and groups with a surplus of time, energy, and motivation, to ponder and engage imaginatively and collectively with their existential reality, beginning from the individual, then the small scale of the family, and all the way up to nation-wide "moral culture" or "religion". The result was an astounding novelty in nature: the development of a cultural association between rulership or governance on the one hand, and the *concepts* of "justice" and "moral righteousness" on the other. Thus, the proclamation of ancient Egyptian kings and queens as sons and daughters of the god *Ra*, functioned as a reminder and assurance that those rulers will identify themselves not only as militarily capable and economically resourceful, but also devoted to justice and moral purity. And though this certainly represents a sunny development in the history of life, yet it is precisely such developments that are in fact *unnatural*, but rather stand as evidence of human's growing uneasiness and battling with the natural order of things, where the individual human is becoming increasingly sensitive and aversive to that which is painful in nature, and is beginning to resolve to increasingly complex forms of imaginative and abstract constructs, such as moral culture or religion, in order to destroy, evade, or contain those natural sources of suffering such as alpha male or ruler violence. Thus, and along the same lines of the development of *civilisation*, the same ancient Egyptians will exhibit further their passion for the neutralisation of what's painful and dangerous in nature, by developing a rather *unrealistic motivation* for the taming of wild animals, and the

¹¹ In opposition here to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and with Ernest Becker's "origin and evolution of inequality" in: *Escape from Evil*. 1975.

historical record speaks of desperate attempts at the domestication of cheetahs, giraffes, and even hyenas!

Human's abstract awareness of nature did not result in an objective or dispassionate understanding of it, but rather has mostly intensified his reactionary opposition and aversion to that which does not feel good in nature, and significantly diminished his capacity to coexist with suffering or to grow resilient with regard to it. And though on the one hand such enhanced aversion to physical and social suffering functioned as a motivator to finding and implementing effective solutions and pain-killers of every kind, ranging from technology and religion to culture, art and love – on the other hand this situation resulted in an increasing *dependency* on those very solutions and pain-killers, the absence or deprivation of which meant instant deterioration and even collapse into such chaos that hurt even more than the natural suffering which individuals and groups sought to avoid or destroy in the first place. The lasting durability of the natural social systems and structures which uphold the animal society one generation after another is unknown in human history, except perhaps in its most primitive "prehistoric" phase – and though the alpha baboon will instinctively and regularly inflict arbitrary harm on those which he governs just to assert his position and station, human society will oppose and resist any such form of violent social dominance, even if the cost will be precisely such debilitating flux of human history which affords neither predictability nor repose.

The picture that we're looking at here goes beyond the common *vestigiality* of certain organs like the appendix, or certain reactions like goose-bumping, which exist in both animals and humans but no longer useful to the latter. For many of the original emotional mechanisms which effectively regulate the behaviour of the animal, and the evolution of which may have itself resulted in the human imagination, have eventually become conflictual or at least no longer compatible with the functioning of that very human imagination to which they gave rise. Rather, the imagination has hijacked and transformed such emotional processes in many significantly different ways, leading mostly to the generation of a state of profound and dazzling perplexity that is unknown to any animal, and therewith resulting also in the introduction of new more complex forms of psychological and social suffering that are exclusively human and human-made. It is a vicious cycle, and from which there is no mundane escape! That abstraction and

imagination which allow human to accurately identify a mundane cause of pain, and moreover, device an effective solution to it, is precisely also that which teaches him to grow increasingly sensitive and antagonistic to the very *prospect* of pain, and thereby, condition his attention to not only find further sources of pain, but *seek* to find them, just like the deer that keeps scanning the horizon constantly, lest it meets its end in the clutches of a crouching lion.

What the Buddha realised was that the discontent and restlessness of human, including that which he himself used to experience, were chronic and constant, and that no matter how much far away one went in his isolation from socioeconomic or mundane conditions, various forms of suffering afflicted the heart still, perhaps manifesting even more visibly and urgently in isolation than when one is obviously plunged in the world. Then the Buddha embarked on a journey of the most thorough meditative introspection, exercising the exact same faculty of the imagination to understand suffering *as a subjective experience* with inherent cognitive and natural roots, rather than as a socioeconomic, cultural, circumstantial, or environmental condition. Such is the power of abstraction that, the Buddha soon found out about the imagination itself, how it functioned as a fundamental mechanism of perplexity and oblivion, and how it distorted the vision of human in ways which made him increasingly obsessed with the nature that exists without him, and oblivious to that which exists within him and with which he unconsciously identifies. Thus, the more human became obsessed with suffering and bent on the removal of what he imagined as its circumstantial causes, the more he remained clueless about what it takes to overcome suffering as a psychological experience, and the more he inwardly suffered. It is a vicious cycle, and from which there is no mundane escape!

The excuse of the anxious deer, however, is that it cannot even conceive of an inward, cognitive, or evolutionary source of suffering; the entire repertoire of its "bad feelings" is wholly conditioned by forces which it couldn't possibly conceive or manipulate. If it is not sick or hungry or sexually aroused, and if it knows that it is in a safe environment; it will not experience any discontent that it cannot dispel with rest and sleep or grooming, nor experience any restlessness that it cannot dispel with play! Human on the other hand, and in the exact same situation of total safety and comfort, would not only sooner or later be assailed by overwhelming

discontent and restlessness that he would not be able to rationally explain, but also painful memories of the past, fearsome thoughts about present ghosts and daemons of all conceptual and imaginative kinds, and debilitating agonising worry about what shall become of one in the future. This is *moha* or ideational perplexity in its most fundamental form, which reverberates within the heart of every human, and not only those who lived alienated after the industrial revolution, but including those who led the most primitive forms of socioeconomic life, and in which human's separation from nature was only minimal. Even then, the very basic and fundamental cognitive capacity to imagine and conceptualise had worked its morbid effect, and out of necessity, and unlike the animal, drove the primitive human in states of insurmountable horror and agitation in response to every painful phenomenon which immediate cause was yet invisible to his ignorant, child-like eye, particularly sickness, disease, and death.



Figure 8: We learn from evidence found in various prehistoric burial sites, that whatever which illnesses were those which manifested themselves in abnormal behavioural symptoms, such as epilepsy for example – the Neolithic human frequently responded to them by drilling a hole through the skull of the afflicted person, thinking that by so doing, the spirits which possessed them will depart or become exposed through the opening. This practice continued well through the European Middle Ages and into the Renaissance! Further, the fear of primitive people regarding those around them who died was so great to the extent that they would tie the arms and legs to the torso of the corpse before burying it in a pit, so as to restrain the dead person from returning to their lives.

We can clearly discern a distinct echo of this same primitive superstition vibrating through all human history, and in relation to increasingly subtler forms of suffering the causes of which were likewise unknown to human.

That is to say, when primitive people imagined transcendental and mythical causes of their puzzling suffering and hardships, they were in fact battling with disease and death, tornadoes and storms, floods and draughts, predation and starvation, and many other such severe natural hardships which harassed their livelihoods and questioned their very survival, and in opposition to which they had to learn how to cooperate together so that this human species could persevere and survive. But having gone beyond nature and wielded increasing control over its wild forces, post-historic people experience a deep *unnatural* suffering, which the wise amongst them call "unhappiness" or "dissatisfaction", and which causes they cannot see or point at just as were the causes of natural hardships to the primitive human. But the very curious thing is that, for the primitive human, failure to identify an immediate material cause led instantly to the imagining or conceptualisation of a transcendental or cosmological one, which finally came to be referred to as "superstition", and which is opposed to the modern scientific quest of finding a rational circumstantial observable cause to all phenomena, including psychological ones, and with the purpose of controlling and manipulating them to bring about desired results. What this scientific *faith* led to in recent times is an increasing departure from transcendental psychological understanding, including that offered by psychoanalysis and evolutionary science, and finally the identification of the origin of suffering in such circumstantial phenomena as genes, the brain, upbringing, cultural conditioning and social inequality; all of which, except in purely medical conditions, fails even worse than the most primitive superstition in offering any actual remedy or relief to psychological suffering.

Such unbridgeable rift between mundane and transcendental doctrines the Buddha managed to transcend by discovering the ultimate root causes of psychological phenomena: Just as material effects follow from material causes, the Buddha saw that psychological effects follow ultimately from other psychological, non-material causes, even if the whole chain of psychological actions and reactions are strictly material and behavioural. This is generally the position of folktales, mythologies, and religious narratives, which incredibly profound cosmological symbolism was never meant to be taken literally! The earliest myths that we find preserved in the historical record reveal that the cosmological was always a reflection to the psychological, and that it was so to the minds of those who had the

imaginative and verbal ability to produce folk and mythological narratives. That not everyone then could grasp the symbolism is only expected, since not everyone today has what it takes to discern, let alone appreciate the symbolic. And as it was in the past so it is at present: human needs the symbolic because it is impossible to give expression to what the psyche experiences otherwise! And the jargon of any "wise" modern psychological understanding exceeds in its subtlety and confounding effect that which we could ever find in the expression of old, very old folktales and mythologies. Just as it was in the past so it is at present: human still struggles and knows not how to control a psyche that afflicts him deeply, and which incredibly subtle and profound manifestations defy the words of any ancient or modern culture, and the difference is only marginal, in the attempt of relieving the psyche of such deep suffering by the scientific search of its roots in the physical brain, or by the superstitious drilling of a hole through the skull that surrounds it!

Animals may fear a shadow and a corpse, human fears ghosts and death; such is the impact of the imagination! Human not only fears certain *things*, but moreover, *ideas*. Yet just like the animal, his attention is conditioned by nature to ascribe every experience of fear to an external cause; nature or evolution never equipped him with the wisdom to realise that ideas are always *inward*, emanating from "within", produced by the imagination, existing without reality, but only in abstraction. Oblivion here has taken a further more complex form: not only is human, just like the animal, unable to comprehend himself as a marionette or stop identifying his self with the emotive strings and the evolutionary manipulator of them, but further, he is unable to comprehend his own imagination (and especially that he would need to use his imagination to comprehend his imagination!), and just as he acts on the basis of emotion the moment it spontaneously arises, he also believes in, if not even grows fascinated and obsessed with what his imagination suggests and presents to his awareness, through that faint subliminal stream of verbal thought that does not cease even in one's sleep! The only reason human fears ghosts is that the unreliable side of his imagination presents them to his consciousness as real – and he fears death only because, with the reliable side of his imagination, he can envisage himself as a corpse. More than the oblivion to that which makes him an emotional animal, there is in human a further oblivion to that which makes

him an imaginative, estranged, prejudiced, erring, delusional, confused and perplexed creature. Thus, the suffering of human comes not only from his inability to see the animal nature from which he sprang, but also the imaginative nature which he himself became.

2.2 Self-Stimulation (Bhava-Tanhā)

On the one hand the creature perceives a flow of external sensorial information, and on the other it experiences corresponding fear of danger and craving for food and sex, as inherent potent evolutionary motivators which become activated or stimulated upon the perception of sensorial information. This seems to be the simple equation through which the stimulation of the oblivious creature unfolds and brings about its own survival as well as the propagation of its species. But there is something important and profound in this seemingly simple situation of stimulation; we call it, "*bhava*"!

The appearance of a predator in the horizon of the steppes is not the sole cause of the subsequent fear and escape of the prey, but another cause exists, which is the prey's inherent capacity or tendency to become at all stimulated by any sensorial experience or information. We could say that without this intrinsic capacity, or rather force of *evolutionary stimulation*, the animal would not find it in itself to *substantiate* any experience (*tanhā/upādāna*), that is, to care, to exhibit emotional concern regarding the *outcome* of such experience whereby it may end up being in the clutch of the approaching predator. Such absence of stimulation is precisely the temporal situation for a Buddhist practitioner, sitting in meditation posture in a wild forest with his eyes closed and attention turned inwardly at the mind rather than outwardly at the environment, nonchalant about all possible dangerous courses which could lead to his physical harm or even death, as he remains sensorially, emotionally, and conceptually impervious to their very presence and approach.

This view is very important for the understanding of Buddhist soteriology, which is often defined in the text as *bhava-nirodha* or the "ending of bhava"; bringing all such intrinsic evolutionary stimulation to an end! It is a transcendental, but experiential and experienceable condition in which the emancipated attention, though fully grasps the object, is no longer stimulated by it neither emotionally nor imaginatively, and does no longer react to it spontaneously; the exact reversal of all that would otherwise naturally happen for a normal, oblivious creature, upon coming in contact with any stimulus. This serves as an excellent cognitive-behavioural

definition of *nibbāna* or Buddhist salvation, the experiential realisation of which led the Buddha to realise that stimulation was not only a *result* of the interaction between the external stimulus and the emotional perception of it, but also that each time such stimulation happened it propagated and reinforced the very tendency or habit *to be stimulated* by sensorial, hedonic, emotional, and ideational experiences in the first place. Stimulation was thus also a *cause* of its own future occurrence and of the renewal of further sensorial attention and emotional and behavioural responses.¹²

Out of this fundamental evolutionary capacity for stimulation, we find a curious development in the case of mammals, who exhibit a significant genre of behaviour that is evidently not driven by any particular environmental stimulus. The question is, why does a mammal that is neither hungry, nor anxious about predation or social dynamics, nor sexually aroused, nor sick or experiencing pain, expend any energy in such a non-productive behaviour as *playing*?

It seems highly probable that playing developed as an evolutionary mechanism of social integration and learning for the offspring, allowing the young to develop their motor skills while at the same time learn about social interaction and communication, which as they later grow into adulthood facilitates grooming and mating on the one hand, and on the other prepares members of the younger generation to either obey or challenge the aging alpha male who will sooner or later have to be replaced by a younger and more able male. But given that even fully grown adults will continue to play, sometimes even when they are alone; playing may perhaps be also useful in the situation where a mammal finds itself in a safe environment that offers plenty of food, and where therefore fear and the drive to explore the

¹² This corresponds to the "*two-factor theory of emotion*" in western psychology. See Schachter S., & Singer, J. (1962). *Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state*. Psychological Review, 69(5), 379-399. || Dutton DG, & Aron AP. (1974). *Some evidence for heightened sexual attraction under conditions of high anxiety*. Personality and Social Psychology. 30(4):510-7. Aside from in further research which examines "curiosity", "playing", or "exploratory behaviour" in mammals, to the best of my knowledge there has been very little or no real recognition of the vital importance of this original condition of *bhava* or evolutionary stimulation in contemporary western research, including that done in motivation and depression. Arthur Schopenhauer (d. 1860), who was himself strongly influenced by Buddhism, was unique among western philosophers in emphasising the profound impact of this intrinsic psychological capacity *to be stimulated*, which he called "*the will to life*" and which he placed at the centre of his philosophy.

environment become spontaneously dormant – playing then may be nature's way of sustaining the animal's fundamental capacity for stimulation in this non-stimulating situation, keeping its faculties *in form* and preventing it from falling into states of extended lethargy and inaction. In all cases playing is a frequent experience in mammals, and it is evidently a mechanism of self-stimulation which functions as a foundation for the exercise of the attention and motor skills in ways which are indeed similar to their stimulation in exploratory, sexual, and fight-or-flight contexts.

Further, and though I have here made separate titles for the exposition of the imagination and self-stimulation one at a time, in experience the two arise together and are mutually reinforcing, to the extent that it may well be argued that this self-stimulatory force developed along with that of the imagination in mammals and humans, especially given that, as I will discuss below, it is also more intense and pervasive in humans than it is in animals. Though imagination and self-stimulation may possibly have originally developed from separate evolutionary roots, it is evident that the more grew the role of the imagination in importance and pervasiveness, the more the creature became stimulated by what the imagination presented and suggested. This is the development of a form of stimulation that differs from the evolutionary one discussed above and which enables the animal to become stimulated by environmental sensorial objects and events; rather this is an *imaginative stimulation*, where the stimulus is not the object itself or the immediate emotion it gives rise to upon sensorial contact, but rather the *ideas* which unfold as the animal comes across the object or even a memory of it. The imagination is extremely resourceful and quick in its capacity to give rise to manifold conceptualisations, opinions, speculations, and even day-dreams about a certain object, moments after the senses come in contact with it or after it arises in memory, and these cognitive constructs become in themselves a source of emotional and behavioural stimulation as follows:

Just as the imagination is that which goes into excess but also that which realises the error and corrects it (or otherwise modifies its view and judgement), self-stimulation is that which allows human to *persist* in any activity, including his investigations of nature and of himself, and conditions him to sustain his attention and evaluation on the production, preservation, and renewal of technology, culture, art, religion, and socioeconomic forms of

organisation and communication. But it can likewise be driven by imaginative excesses to pursue excessive activities, on which the more fundamental *evolutionary stimulation* seem to exercise a balancing or corrective effect, particularly when it comes to basic emotional impulses such as fear and lust, ensuring that mammals and humans continued to fear dangers and pursue procreation within the confines of nature and not too much beyond that, should the desire for self-stimulation takes off with the imagination without a natural limiting constraint.

Evolutionary stimulation, particularly of a *negative* sort, in this sense perhaps functions as a *safety valve* in such creatures that have developed abstractive and imaginative capacities, the excesses of which could at least potentially (and often do actually) expose them to various possible dangers associated with confused judgements and self-stimulatory behaviours; a condition which manifests further neurologically in the inhibitory impact exercised by the more *emotional* right hemisphere of the brain on the abstractive left hemisphere. Indeed it is already a form of imaginative excess to judge that hyenas may be domesticated, and the actual attempt to domesticate them involves a great deal of self-stimulation for the ancient Egyptian trainer. In this situation, evolutionary stimulation, in the form of *fear*, was precisely the force which sustained the trainer's caution with regard to the hyenas, and without it, it is possible that nothing would have restricted his imagination from becoming so relaxed or nonchalant about their possible deadly danger, or perhaps becoming even *lustful* with regard to them and thereby go into the further excess of attempting to copulate with them rather than suffice with domesticating them! And it is not like *zoophilia* or *bestiality* are unknown in human behaviour, when the other species is not as dangerous as hyenas!

The condition where the imagination could become itself a stimulating force resulted in a radical transformation in human behaviour, rendering it exceedingly motivated by an inward desire for a kind of self-stimulation that is independent from nature. This can be seen clearly in human playing when compared to that of animals. Though it happens that dogs for example may become so engrossed in play to the extent that what began as a playful chase or wrestling may later transform into an aggressive display of dominance, theirs never even remotely approaches the extreme extent by which human's engagement in play may become obsessive and addictive, and his reaction to

the outcome of playing (winning or losing) may become emotionally substantiated, and even in relation to games in which he himself is not even playing, as in hooliganism for example. What is further remarkable in human playing is the display of dominance in non-physical games that are purely abstract, such as chess or cards, through which *intelligence* rather than physical vigour becomes the skill of mastery. Other forms of such exclusively human imaginative playfulness appear in other domains of human life, indeed including particularly grooming and mating.

The same comparison can be drawn between animal and human in every other shared activity besides playing, and it will lead to the exact same observation, where human is at least capable of far greater levels of self-stimulation through these activities than animals do. For example, dogs may exhibit signs of great excitement about eating even before any food is yet presented to them (by hearing Pavlov's bell or any other conditioner) – and in comparison, human appears to be so much more in control of his yearning; yet such phenomena as obesity and eating in excess of the nourishment that one's body requires are extremely rare in animals, let alone the complex preferences about cuisine and taste, which wild animals may have only in the most basic form, except indeed if they were domesticated.

But what is it that drives human to pursue self-stimulating experiences in such excess and on such wide scale? Which may perhaps be better answered by asking another question: What happens when human is *deprived* of that which succeeds in stimulating his attention and motivation?

An environmental stimulus (such as a predator or food) is the natural mobiliser of attention and motivation; but for a creature that has killed or confined all predators and stores great quantities of food, and who in every other respect maintains full control over his environment – *utter boredom and intolerable restlessness* become only the most expected consequence! When natural stimuli are thus absent, the psyche becomes *under-stimulated*, and such represents itself to the consciousness as an experience of pain, the extent of which could grow intense if not resolved. But unlike the animal, for human even playing will, sooner or later, fail to quench his natural and profound desire for self-stimulation, and to escape the emerging suffering that threatens to devour him into its dark and foul belly, human's imagination makes an opportunity and chance for self-stimulation, or a play-

thing, out of every single experience indiscriminately! Thus is the development of a new form of stimulated existence, or the "will to life", that goes far beyond that of the animal. The entire life of human is no longer driven solely by basic evolutionary impulses, but even more by a desire for self-stimulation that is now independent from mere physical survival and that aims at goals which are far more complex than safety and procreation, all of which find their root in the human imagination, be it individual or collective. Recognising the pervasiveness, persistence, profundity, and dominance of such imaginative self-stimulation; "*art*", its production and appreciation, finally came to represent a form of mundane human deliverance in the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, and many other existentialist philosophers.

And just as human feels either pleasure or pain in his experiences, he can no longer relate to any activity with neutrality or impartiality, but either with a motive for self-stimulation or with discontent, which as we shall soon see, arises in the case of an unrewarding activity that is imposed or unavoidable. The biggest trouble here is that sooner or later, *any* activity is bound to eventually become unrewarding; for the mind is wired to become quickly accustomed to the impact of any repeated experience, otherwise the organism would never be able to normalise the presence of such non-stop functions in its own body, and the attention would be constantly summoned to heed every heartbeat and every breath, in such an attention-depleting situation that could only place tight limitations on the scope of motivation and effort and only to the detriment of the organism's chances of survival. Furthermore, the consciousness would likewise never be able to bring itself to sleep at night, as the hippocampus would convulse with alertness not only upon detecting unfamiliar or unexpected stimuli in the surrounding environment, but even regular ones such as the ticking of a clock or touch of a pillow!

Surely the mind must be naturally able to detect repeated patterns and normalise their impact and presence, and one of the things which make a serious illness so devastating and paralysing to motivation and effort is that, though its painful impact is constant, the mind never normalises it as that would only lead the organism to disregard it rather than respond to it with great urgency, and indeed, a slight palpitation or chest-pain is all that it takes in order for the mind to instantly bring the presence of heart-beating

and respiration to full awareness. Thus a seriously ill person is unable to develop a motivation for anything other than healing as quickly as possible, or he may dream of doing something else, but attention and effort wouldn't flow from this dreamy motivation until the illness is dispelled. The same applies to the constant presence of environmental stressors and dangers, which the mind regards as potentially life-threatening and therefore never normalises their impact, urging the organism to remove itself from this stressful or dangerous environment as quickly as possible. It is for this reason that those animals and humans who live for protracted periods in warzones, or persist in an overwhelmingly stressful duty or job, eventually develop a variety of mental dysfunctions.

The normalisation of an experience is precisely its *neutralisation*, that is, a normalised experience does no longer feel good or bad; that's precisely how we become unaware of its very presence. The moment the mind normalises a certain *quantity* of a repeated stimulating experience, the moment the stimulation ceases, that is, the ego perceives no pleasurable impact through that experience any more. This then leads to dissatisfaction in the form of under-stimulation or deprivation of stimulation, and motivates the ego to search for an effective pleasurable stimulus similar to that previously enjoyed, either by exposing the mind and body to a *higher dose* of stimulation in the same experience, or by shifting to a new experience the impact of which has not yet been normalised. This natural condition of "*diminishing returns*" is the root cause of human's characteristic restlessness and dissatisfaction, and often results in various forms of obsessions, such as alcoholism, substance abuse, and addictive gambling and gaming.

But the concern of the Buddha was not with this buzz of stimulation when it functions only in excess, but even when it is experienced with the moderation prescribed by Socrates and Epicurus, or in *normal* doses with which the individual is able to grow satisfied and seeks no more. Even then, the very reality of *dependency* on any dose of pleasurable self-stimulation meant that the psyche is necessarily deficient in stability, freeness, and wisdom, given that all that it takes in order for it to fall in states of discomfort, boredom, restlessness and suffering, is for those expected normal doses of pleasurable stimulation to be even momentarily suspended.



Figure 9: Facial expressions (and body language in general) tell the tale about all such emotional and mental states that are unique to mammalian species; all of which arise in tight connection with both conditions of over-stimulation and under-stimulation. A host of negative states arise as soon as we don't get those normal doses of pleasurable stimulation that we expect, or when we are stimulated rather by pain or danger; which reveals the extent by which our mental health and our *normalcy* have become dependent on a constant flow of pleasurable and rewarding stimuli and constant avoidance of negative ones. Thus, and in significant variance with western psychology but remarkable accordance with Cynicism, Buddhist psychology does not regard "normalcy" as a valid standard of mental health, and sees instead "self-awareness" as the correct measure of mental health.

One of the things which could illuminate this Buddhist position, which may at first appear to be extreme or exclusively *renunciatory*, is to ponder the nature and extent of the destructive impact of under-stimulation, the most extreme form of which is perhaps *solitary confinement*, which is often regarded and practised as the only possible form of punishment of those already punished by being sent to prison, and which has proven to cause significant psychological damage, leading in numerous cases to suicide, and which many consider to be a form of torture rather than punishment. Indeed it perhaps represents the very other extreme of torture by over-stimulation of the sense of touch, that is, by subjecting the body to extreme forms of hardship and pain. Nothing is harder to bear than the deprivation of sensorial, social, and imaginative external stimulation, to the extent that a thus deprived creature would find instant and great relief by resuming contact even with such experiences that it would normally dislike or even

fear. In this case even those disliked contacts represent an opportunity for the suffering creature to feel alive and active once more, as they stimulate attention and give rise to motivation, any motivation, which brings instant balance and satisfaction to the psyche.

The absence of environmental stimuli means an object-less attention, and that is a situation unknown to nature and to evolutionary functions; there is no natural cure for it, nor an artificial one. What happens in this situation of under-stimulation is that the imagination becomes the person's only possible effective stimulus, and the psyche drowns completely in a world of increasingly psychotic dreams and delusions. Further, the suppression of motivation and attention by denying contact with the environment gives rise to immense restlessness and agitation in both body and mind, the pain of which may well become overwhelming and unbearable, leading confined persons in some cases to attempt suicide by cutting their veins with their own teeth, as they had no access to any sharp objects. I can imagine no form of pain that so deeply and directly presses itself against one's innermost sense of life and being other than this, in that any other form of pain occurs precisely through contact with the environment and the stimulation of the senses, including as we have seen physical torture.

Back to normalcy, we find ourselves in a very similar situation, constantly torn between these two extremes of over and under stimulation – it is only that they manifest in less extreme forms through our normal life and living. *Sleeping* is where they reflect themselves best; such daily plunge in a coma-like oblivion where the psyche finally gets to relief itself from the tremendous buzz of sensorial stimulation, and the emerging out from which, back to life, back to the world of sensorial stimulation and all the automatic stress that it entails, is always hard and tiresome. And though sleep readily and easily offers such great relieving effect, it so happens that the sum of over-stimulation to which *normal* people are *normally* exposed in their *normal* everyday lives in a *normal* city or village, is so overwhelming to the extent that it will exercise a seriously destructive effect, in this way or that, on their sleep experience, and to the extent of posing serious challenges to their professional and private quality of life. The astounding epidemiology of

various sleep-disorders is perhaps one of the best indicators of what's wrong with *normalcy*!¹³

This morbid and bleak picture helps us see the extent by which our dependency on a certain preferred type and dose of self-stimulation is so fundamental to our sanity, self-control, sociability, and general sense of wellbeing and desire for life and living. Such is the necessity of self-stimulation to the extent that extreme deprivation of it can bring a human to reject life, seek death, and attempt suicide. But even a slight fluctuation in what one feels, mostly self-unconsciously, as one's balance of stimulation, results instantly in a type or another, and degree or another, of aversion and discontent. Further, human knows that he is not in control over the many different variables of life, perhaps even most of them, and though he wishes his experiences to unfold in a certain specific way, he is intelligent enough, again mostly self-unconsciously, to intuit that frustrations of all kinds are coming his way, perhaps constantly. Restlessness and worry and absence of peace and serenity are thus also inherent in the situation of dependency on self-stimulation, whether or not one gets exactly or mostly what one wants – in either case human is bound to be profoundly afflicted by restlessness and anguish in his innermost heart. This reinforces the habit of relating to everything, any experience whatsoever and regardless of its nature and of the circumstance in which it unfolds, as a possible chance for self-stimulation, a chance for life, for experiencing and feeling something new that the mind has not yet normalised and neutralised and fully consumed.

It is precisely through this condition that we find certain excessive human behaviours happening without any understandable rational cause, particularly in the form of greed and cruelty, such as hoarding stuff that has no particular meaning or potential use or value, stealing compulsively rather than due to need, lying to get someone in trouble though no vengeful motives

¹³ Various sources cite about 30% of humans as suffering from insomnia at any given time, with 40% of those experiencing a concomitant psychiatric disorder. Hypersomnia, which is excessive sleeping or sleepiness during daytime, are for example "frequent complaints occurring in 29% and 14% of the Austrian population. Epidemiological studies demonstrate a high comorbidity between nonorganic hypersomnia and mental disorders." Saletu B. et al. (2001). *Nonorganic hypersomnia: epidemiology, diagnosis, and therapy*. Wien Klin Wochenschr. 113(7-8):266-77.

exist, destroying the property of a total stranger, or torturing a pet or even a child just to see how they react! These are examples of excessive behaviours which all emanate from the constant habit of relating to everything as an opportunity for self-stimulation, and the ferocity of which varies greatly across individuals and may go so far as to lead to serious criminal behaviour. It also fluctuates across time in the one individual, and that's how a person who was mostly *normal*, our long-time neighbour or even relative, may suddenly appear in the newspapers as a murderer or a rapist.

2.3 Depression (Vibhava-Tanhā)

"Let go of everything but your love to me," said Nature, "and you shall never again, suffer!"

"You mean be an animal!" said human!

—Mahaviveka

We tend to think of depression as a result of a bad experience, event, or condition – that is, we think of *how* it happens, but seldom think of *why* it happens, where did it originate from, and what evolutionary end does it serve. Depression has been regarded predominantly as a condition of low motivation, low stimulation, low *bhava*, thus, *vi-bhava*! It manifests through a range starting from mild discontent and low mood, and goes all the way up to clinical or severe depression and suicidal inclinations. For convenience and out of want of a similar all-inclusive English equivalent of "vibhava-tanhā", I will henceforth refer to that entire *spectrum of aversion* as "depression".

I have postponed talking about "pain" to this point because it is so tightly connected with depression. Pain is of course a very fundamental aspect of the life of living beings, and we can trace its functioning back to the most basic forms of life, including bacteria. There is something inherent in the various types of simple organisms, such as bacteria and plants, which allows them to recognise what's nourishing and what's harmful in the environment. In those simple organisms, this recognition of a nourishing or harmful contact happens on a purely chemical or sensorial basis, and it automatically stimulates a subsequent *upādāna* or *reactionary behaviour* on the part of the organism, either that of seeking (*bhava-tanhā*) or repulsion and withdrawal (*vibhava-tanhā*). This conditioned reactionary behaviour of the organism may be regarded as the foundation of all life and living, and it is the origin of what is customarily referred to as "the will", of which much will be discussed later.

The ultimate function of pain is to suppress or stimulate a corresponding behaviour whereby the organism becomes removed from a source of harm. If the creature is seeking something harmful, pain makes it stop seeking it, and if something harmful is imposed on the creature, pain makes it react to it

aversively. Out of this straightforward mechanism emerges "depression", which is the emotional or mental state experienced by the organism throughout its contact with a source of pain, and which ceases the moment such contact is terminated, and lasts when it is resumed or sustained. It is a naturally occurring form of under-stimulation or low motivation: no one confines the creature in a dark cell here and based on that motivation becomes suppressed, but of its own accord, motivation plunges, and not due to the absence of a stimulus, but because a painful stimulus persists and is unavoidable, and whether this stimulus be physical, such as illness or injury, or cognitive, such as remembering a lost cherished object.

The evolutionary utility of depression is to restrain the attentional and motivational capacities of an afflicted creature from being directed to pursue any end other than the removal of the source of pain, and that applies even to such ends and pursuits which are nourishing and pleasurable, hence the loss of appetite even for food and sex during states of depression. Thus depression is a form of *alarm*, though it may be subtle and self-unconscious, very much similar to the continued convulsions of the hippocampus with alertness upon detecting an unfamiliar pattern in the environment, or in the condition of constant stimulation by the continual presence of danger, to which the mind never becomes reconciled and with which it never normalises. The difference here being that, unlike over-stimulation which arises in the case of danger, and which motivates the creature on the emotional and physiological levels to use its muscular energy to escape or fight; depression functions through *vi-bhava* or under-stimulation, disarming the creature precisely of such motivation that would otherwise allow it to pursue other ends and ignore an on-going source of pain.

Illness manifests as a persistent and frequent one such source of pain, and we may indeed find the evolutionary roots of psychological depression in discerning what it takes to dispel illness: *immune defences*. In natural terms, an ill animal is faced directly with a death threat; its survival is at stake. A bacterial or viral infection, or one caused by a worm or any other such parasitical creature that invades the body, is by itself a form of predation, only, there can be no escape from it by relying on one's motor capacities! One's body becomes itself the environment which hosts and sustains the very existence of the parasite, and that which the parasite attacks is tissues or organs inside the body. Of such kind of predation there can be no escape,

and that's precisely why "fear" does not arise as an evolutionary response to illness. The immune system evolved in such a way as to meet this deadly challenge, and to do so by no less than killing these various types of parasites which do not cease to invade the body, and which themselves in turn evolve and develop their strengths against immune defences in the course of time. The metabolic resources which such defensive, or rather counter-aggressive immune system requires at its disposal in order to successfully quell a seriously threatening parasitical attack, are considerable, and the usage of which often comes at the expense of other healthy bodily functions, and causes other painful functions such as fever, vomiting, and diarrhoea.

Pain is experienced in various different ways at once in the situation of illness, including that which the functioning of the immune system will itself cause – but depression, here in its most rudimentary form, is precisely the force which brings the animal down, causing it to lie on earth and to rest its head on it, at the same horizontal level with the heart, and further causes it to become disinterested in, even repulsed by every other desire and inclination, like food and sex, that are in normal times highly compelling and stimulating. For the mobilisation of a single muscle takes some toll on the metabolic resources of the body, and so do the various other physiological functions that are associated with the slightest motivation and effort, none of which can be afforded when the urgent exhaustive needs of the immune system are being prioritised. Until the illness abates, this fundamental *bodily depression* will be expected to last without interruption.

Out of this basic bodily depression emerges another that is psychological, which manifests in a most rudimentary form in mammals. For example, a lion will manifest distinct depressed behaviours after it breaks its jaw or leg in a dangerous hunt. This lion will never be able to hunt again, and though it will survive in the future by subsisting on what remains of the quarry hunted by other lions, still it manifests a distinct diminution in its attentional and motivational conditions in comparison to its state before its crippling injury. This is a significant development, because depression here does no longer arise because of the afflictive bodily condition itself (as in illness), but rather due to the lion's engrained *impulse* to continue hunting and exploring the environment, and to use its motor skills to their fullest capacity, and which the lion now *knows* it can no longer pursue. This sort of *longing* to the unrealisable represents the development of a form of

sentimental illness, which itself now functions as the painful stimulus that causes depression, and which would immediately cease the moment the injured lion stops its ingrained desire for fitness, activeness, and hunting.

But it will be rather difficult for the lion to bring to a total end these natural motivations immediately following its injury, just as would be the case for a female mammal that has lost her infant and is unable to readily stop her yearning for it. In both cases, the difficulty lies in that hunting and attachment are themselves necessary evolutionary mechanisms which strike deep roots in the creature's psyche and therefore cannot be readily transcended by any animal, and those species which could dispel with these essential impulses so easily, ended up all extinct a long time ago! The very survival of a species depends entirely on such drives as hunting for food, escaping predators, finding mates, and caring for the offspring; and the stronger were these drives in the individual members of a certain species, the better was the survival of the entire species. It is for this reason that when an individual animal is exposed to sustained danger or stress, or loses its partner or offspring or its own ability to hunt, these situations represent to its psyche something very similar to what illness represents to the body; it is a form of *existential illness* which differs from physical illness only in that the aggressor is not a parasite that attacks one's bodily support, but rather an unfavourable change or transformation in one's physical and social environmental supports, that is, one's environmental *home*.

This offers an explanation of a creature's emotional reaction to the experience of *loss*, as a situation of continued desire to re-establish the favoured balance in its environmental conditions by reuniting with those variables in it which have become lost and which cannot be recovered. Nature programs the creature to develop these profound and persistent emotional inclinations, it instils in the lion the desire for hunting and in the female the attachment to the baby, and rewards them with a sense of emotional balance and stability when they realise these desires in life. But when such fundamental evolutionary impulses are not realised, or when they become lost or denied, the organism continues to seek them on the attentional and emotional levels, just as one does not stop seeking water when thirsty, or an effective medicine when ill. The creature thus *ruminates* over the lost and yearns for it, precisely because it is its natural habit to seek it and seek the sense of wellbeing which it provides.

By the time we arrive in our examination of this evolutionary condition in human, we again find such sentiments of yearning and attachment taking far more extreme forms. Just as the *idea* of domesticating a hyena succeeds in stimulating the ancient Egyptian mind, the idea of "reunion with a lost baby" may totally obsess the mind of its mother – in both cases, human is straying from nature due to its enhanced cognitive capacities. And just as nature deploys "fear" to restrain the ancient Egyptian from growing too nonchalant about the danger of the hyenas which he is stimulated to domesticate, it restrains the mother from ruminating continually and indefinitely on the lost infant with whom she is stimulated to reunite, *by making the very memory of it a painful and punishing experience*; this is precisely what depression is. For a depressed state is something that always feels bad, and in greater levels of intensity, it may indeed become unbearable. This pain that arises each time the creature *remembers* a lost object and yearns for it, becomes itself the punishing *emotional illness*, and the healing from which requires the abandonment of that very *memory*, which is precisely what eventually happens.

This process unfolds in a fashion similar to that of weaning a young mammal, gradually and in the course of time, as the frustration of the young from being no longer allowed to suckle, and often by being physically punished each time it tries, eventually teaches it to stop trying and to shift its interest and seeking to other forms of nourishment. Nature thus wants the creature to overcome its loss and to *move on*, and to ensure that this will happen, it must frustrate every attempt of the creature to ruminate and dwell on imagined or lost things which are of no use to its further survival, and it eventually succeeds in realigning the creature's attention and motivation back with realisable opportunities with which it can recreate for itself a new favourable environmental home. Thus, without depression, a mammal's preoccupation with and yearning for the thing lost could become continual and indefinite, without any natural restraining force, to the extent of endangering the survival of the creature which becomes now paralysed by its longing and inability to pursue with life in a normal fashion. Indeed herein manifest the terrible cruelty of nature, as it on the one hand pushes the creature to develop various attachments to various objects and experiences, but punishes its continued loyalty to them when they become irrevocably lost.

Both fear and depression function as evolutionary mechanisms which prevent the ego from becoming continually and deeply engrossed in the endless world of imaginative ends, the difference being that fear is appropriate with hyenas, because they are always dangerous, and fear here effectively teaches the creature to avoid *all hyenas* and everything else that resembles them in its capacity to harm, and whenever and wherever they may be expected to be encountered. But fear would be rather counterproductive as a natural mechanism to restrain not only yearning in particular, such as an emotional memory of a lost infant for example, but any cognitive function in general, because fear is necessarily *contagious* and engulfs about everything that is associated with the fear-eliciting object or stimulus. As such if a memory of a lost infant was to be countered by fear rather than depression, this may well condition the mother rather to avoid mating and procreation themselves, or even to become alienated and afraid of its own impulses or capacities of motherhood, caring, and attachment, and possibly even of remembering and memory! That much contagious is fear, and so much unlike the foreign hyena-object in an external environment that fear will rendered it forever avoided, such intrinsic inward mental capacities as attachment and memory will continue to be useful and essential for the normal and effective functioning of the mammal in the future after its loss. Thus nature has programmed the living creature to respond with fear to an external dangerous or harmful stimulus, but only with depression to an inward mental painful stimulus.

Depression is thus fundamentally nature's way of frustrating the motivation of a creature that employs its *fundamental* and *useful* evolutionary mental capacities, including attention, emotional memory, and attachment, in the service of such imaginative ends that beget no natural benefits or rewards. This explains the rarity of depressed behaviour in animals, as they are naturally disinterested in all such experiences in which they find no natural purpose or reward. Mammals generally exhibit a very rudimentary form of depression in certain specific situations, most notably when a mother loses those infants in whom she invested care and nurturing, or due to sustained exposure to stressors, or while in captivity, and sometimes when the animal loses a partner or even the human owner (as in domestic dogs). But things begin to get immediately interesting as soon as we behold the chimpanzee, which increased capacity to experience a more

sophisticated, sentimental, imaginative form of sadness and melancholy, for example when it witnesses the death of a group-member, or even watches a scene of separation and loss in a movie – is accompanied by an increased capacity in imagination and self-stimulation, and employment of motivation and effort in the pursuit of such unnatural ends as mimicking human customs and learning sign language!

All these capacities seem to evolve together hand and hand: imagination, self-stimulation, and depression, the one directly feeding the other. On the one hand we have the imagination and self-stimulation which enable even dolphins to sustain their attention on relatively complex learning tasks, and allow humans to do far more complex feats than basic learning and innovation, in an increasingly abstract domain and for no reward aside from the very satiation of the tremendous appetite for self-stimulation. This is precisely the shift that goes *beyond nature*, and that's why depression emerges as nature's reaction to regulate and restrain it. For in human, we are no longer talking merely about this loss and that yearning to which depression arises as a response, but rather we are looking at a human existence that is characterised mostly by unnatural life and living, and where even those activities which are still natural, such as eating and engaging in sexual intercourse, are being experienced with increasingly unnatural levels of self-stimulation, all of which disrupts the hedonic and emotional balance and contentment which is found in animals and also in primitive human communities, and to which nature responds by nothing other than the punishment of depression.

Thus every human activity becomes shrouded by the possibility of pain, and alike those activities that are imposed on him, and those which he freely chooses to undertake. For nature does not make an evaluation of human goals and responds to them accordingly; it does not have that kind of intelligence! Nature only knows how much mental and muscular *effort* a creature is expending *right now*, and how much responsive that is with the ultimate goals and concomitant needs of safety, survival, and procreation. Every activity that does not strictly correspond to such natural ends, will elicit a response that is characterised by aversion, punishment, suppression, and depression. That's why any unnatural activity represents a challenge to human's attention and motivation, even if it is one which the individual may be *conceptually* interested to undertake, as in learning a musical instrument

or writing an academic thesis, or any other such pursuit the gratification of which will be "*delayed*", that is, materialising only later when one will have become proficient in playing the instrument or have finished the thesis. For effort is needed to accomplish about any unnatural goal; the harder the objective and the more delayed the gratifying stimulation it offers, the greater the effort needed. And though certain complex tasks may at times succeed in stimulating the mind as a pleasurable play-thing, as appears in the acrobatic moves which dolphins seem to indulge in exhibiting before a human audience, and in exchange of the mastering and performing of which they get many a nourishing fish thrown by the trainer right into their gorges – the challenges, difficulties, and efforts, which are required for mastering the piano or finishing a well-written and well-researched thesis, for example, will very often be more painful and tiresome than pleasurable and enjoyable.

Upon contact with such evident signs of aversion and pain, the animal immediately responds by withdrawing from its unrewarding pursuit, but not human. Human will still think of the myriad delayed gratifications or rewards which he is pursuing as "worth the effort", but nature will think not! Nature functions in terms of evolutionary rather than imaginative ends, and the effort dedicated to an unnatural end feels just like attempting to hold a heavy object against the immutable, unwavering work of gravity, as one is here employing the resources, energies, and reserves afforded one by nature, to the service of that which is itself unnatural. Thus comes the lower stratum of the spectrum of depression: lethargy, procrastination, inattention, boredom, and similar other states of the sickness of the heart, exactly the inverse of stimulation and motivation, which very often finally succeeds in turning one's attention away from one's own chosen and highly regarded, but very unnatural objectives. Once the striving individual is no longer stimulated by his unnatural pursuit, he experiences much pain if he keeps doing it, and an immediate relief, freedom, and renewed energy, the moment he takes his hands off the keyboard, either that of the piano or the computer, and then comes that fresh motivation to exercise the attention in something "recreational", like playing or socialising, precisely, a naturally self-stimulating pursuit! What happened here is that the moment the person stopped pursuing the unnatural end, the moment nature stopped weighing his attention and motivation down; that's where the sense of relief comes from, as if submitting to gravity and finally dropping the heavy weight off

one's shoulders. It is also for this reason that it is a small minority of individuals that amount to any degree of "excellence" in any field; that's why excellence is excellence, and not just a normalcy!

This is the impact of exactly the same mechanism which suppresses yearning for remembered or imagined objects that are of no evident use, though it functions here on the more minute level of the attention. And one can easily see how, should the attention follow a distant goal without this natural evolutionary restraining force, the mind could likewise lose touch with reality and become totally distracted away from basic survival needs and obsessed with attaining its distant goal without interruption, in what may be regarded as a condition of indefinite *hyper-focus*, which indeed often results in neglect of such basic needs as eating, socialising, and even sleeping.¹⁴ Thus it is evident that the natural condition of the mind is one where a certain natural balance between attention and pleasure is established; such balance arises naturally and steers the functioning of the mind automatically; that's why animals, and humans living in primitive settings, exhibit quite a remarkable degree of contentment and absence of depression, in that the attention finds its objects of stimulation and resolves to rest and repose from stimulation without much effort, or rather such mental effort is entirely conditioned and programmed by nature, and it only takes an experience of loss, or continual stress or fear, in order for restlessness, grief, and yearning to arise. In such natural situation of balance the oblivious creature is "in its element" and experiences no significant pain or turmoil except solely that which is possibly imposed by the environment, and many tales in literature extol precisely such natural life and living in which the human heart finally finds itself *at home* without need for much rationalisations, explanations and agitations.

¹⁴ This seems to contradict the speculation proposed by Thom Hartmann (1993); *Attention deficit disorder: A different perception*, Underwood-Miller – that hyper-focus may have been a natural or original evolutionary adaptive mechanism that became later maladaptive through the shift from hunting to farming, which is unlikely also given the fact that hyper-focus behaviours in mammals differ from those we find in humans, including those diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. Animals exhibit rather a dispersed and erratic attention that becomes focused only upon contact with an object of interest or urgency, and their interest in a curious but not useful object is usually short-lived. Rather it seems that such enhanced form of over-stimulated attention is an exclusively human trait and likewise tightly intertwined with the development of the imagination and abstraction, which alone are capable of prioritising any unnatural task over eating, socialising, and sleeping; all of which is an impossibility in animals.

This sharply contrasts with the life of human in a demanding socioeconomic environment, in which the intentional moulding and conditioning of the attention is a necessary effort for socioeconomic rather than natural survival, and which results precisely in the host of afflictive states associated with both over- and under- stimulation, that is, stress and restlessness or lack of natural motivation. In such more complex and unnatural environments, human ends up pursuing this and that goal and carrying this and that responsibility, all of which are entirely divorced from nature. Such represents a tremendous psychological weight which human doesn't even have the privilege to put down, and on account of which the Buddha saw a renunciate secluded life as a significant factor for the devoted quest after wisdom and freedom, and their experiential realisation. Hard to imagine is human's attentional and motivational burden in an environment characterised predominantly by its great distance from natural living! Thus is the spread of various shades and intensities of depression in modern times. The poor rat struggles and shows great zeal in avoiding that side of the cage in which it receives an electric shock. But when the shock was given where ever it went, it finally sat motionless and lost, precisely, its *will to life*. Such exhausted hopeless state manifests through human life as, *depression in purposelessness*: an aimless, unmotivated existence which is not even based on any faith in nihilism! Here, though one is not confined in a dark cell, and though the senses have full access to all the possibilities of life and experience in the world, yet one's attentive faculties are never stimulated by anything in the environment, neither by challenging hardships, nor by enticing opportunities; thus, the imagination takes over and steers the psyche toward increasing delusions.

Such *involuntary death of mundane motivation*, which is not triggered neither by loss nor by pain, is yet another exclusively human phenomenon, the prevalence of which is rather surprising given the epidemiology of such conditions as schizoid personality disorder along with certain kinds of depression. We have already seen how boredom or the normalisation of environmental hedonic and social stimuli naturally results in the excess of motivation (obsessions and addictions), but it is noteworthy that, with certain temperaments and personalities, such boredom may also result in the exact opposite condition. Individuals who, like the Buddha, have previously had access to a vast spectrum of pleasurable experiences in the

course of an eventful life, may eventually grow disinterested in the experience of conditioned pleasure *itself*, having experienced too many different kinds of pleasures and eventually grew bored or discontented with each and every one of them. This condition is widespread in developed countries or among well-off families where increasing levels of pleasure are accessible without difficulty, and sometimes even children will develop it in a remarkably young age! A sincere and accomplished *nihilist practitioner* would be expected to reach precisely that state, and so nihilist views and beliefs may also facilitate and reinforce such attitude of aimless existence, the impact of which on the psyche could become permanent if the individual abides in it continually or for a prolonged time, to the extent that one may finally become no longer able to recognise any stimulus neither as a hardship nor an opportunity. It is for this reason that environments which offer easy or many rewards, and no frustrations or serious challenges, may well be potentially dangerous for the further development of motivation and contentment in children and adults.

However the causes of such involuntary withdrawal and abstinence in some individuals is sometimes only mysterious, and it will be worth noting here that such condition of withdrawal is certainly a vivid characteristic also of those who grow inclined to spirituality and who develop interest in transcendental motivations. It is possible that some force exists in the human psyche which makes it incline toward the transcendental at the same time as it alienates it from the mundane. What could this force be, cannot be known with any certainty; some say it is karma or certain past-life qualities of consciousness, or it may perhaps be some special force of the imagination, enabling human to transcend not only nature, but also his own human condition, and to see it with puzzlement and curiosity, rather than identify with it in total oblivion; an essential capacity which we shall now examine.

3. Human Transcends Human

3.1 "The Human Condition"

"Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss. [...] What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal." – Friedrich Nietzsche (1885. tr. Thomas Common)

"It is precisely the godlike in ourselves that we are ambivalent about, fascinated by and fearful of, motivated to and defensive against. This is one aspect of the basic human predicament, that we are simultaneously worms and gods; gods with anuses." – Abraham Maslow (1963)

"Yet, at the same time, as the Eastern sages also knew, man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways—the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever." – Ernest Becker (1973)

We have seen how imagination and self-stimulation work in unison in order to beget that entire human civilisation that we see everywhere around us; this is perhaps the *reliable* side of these human capacities and was perhaps nature's blind evolutionary purpose behind it. But this could not happen without further serious ramifications: the same imagination knows no restraint, to the extent that it could override even fundamental emotional impulses such as fear and lust, and further, human could now find any experience as either pleasurable or painful that was in fact naturally neither. This is the unreliable side effect of the development of the imagination, which led to human's speedy departure from nature, developing extreme sensitivity, aversion and fear with regard to all forms of pain, and endless

yearning for every possible pleasure; thus he became never satiated, never content, constantly seeking, restless, and dissatisfied.

This sort of human *malfunction* which manifests in such phenomena as obsessions, addictions, and depression, strongly hints at the possibility that the development of the imagination was an event that represented a departure from the natural order of things; a *singularity event*, which pulled human out of the command and logic of nature. We may not know what force is behind such curious development, and if it was nature itself, then we may come to the conclusion that all the natural laws and principles of "life" which existed before human, were only transitional, leading onward toward the human, a point at which something else, something new, became. Perhaps then it is true that even human is merely a transitional thing, too, and that a further development shall come out of his existence one day in the future, Nietzsche's *Übermensch* perhaps, and which will dwarf the high stature of human just as the emergence of human immediately marginalised the existence of the chimp!

Raymond Kurzweil suggests that "the technological singularity is very near," only some 15 years ahead or so!¹⁵ There is every reason for me to keep an open mind about such possibility, because it seems indeed logical that whatever transcendental force or law or principle that has begotten imagination in human, will not stop there, and may indeed bring about yet a further game-changing feature upon existence. But 15 years from now would have made it some 2500 years ahead from the perspective of the Buddha, and surely, the Buddha would not wait! The quest after the transcendence of the "human condition" is very ancient, and it starts from the simple observation that human already exists, and that so does his suffering. One sage after another flowing across the flux of human history have addressed this matter, and theirs is only a confusing web of opinions about the human condition and about what it takes to transcend it. Suffering, stress, and discontent are indeed fundamental characteristics of human existence, and we shall soon see how the Buddha surmounted this puzzle of all puzzles, and uprooted the root of all mental suffering, and further gave us that which could bring about

¹⁵ Raymond Kurzweil (2005). *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. And also: *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. 1999. Viking press.

our own salvation; something to spend our time doing throughout the next 15 years or so, and just in case the prophecy of Mr. Kurzweil, like many other prophets, falters!

The imagination however did not deliver human entirely from the clutch of nature; human may now see and know nature, love or hate it, obey or rebel against it, but he still feels and acts just like an animal, and is still conditioned by the needs of an animal. The ultimate and fundamental law of life: seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, is still at the core of human's cognitive foundations, and the imagination has only intensified these impulses rather than caused them to grow less urgent or severe. The result is a pervasive form of self-stimulation and depression; a dose of pain pokes at the human heart even as he gives in to confoundedness and stress over which brand of butter or jam to choose out of the tens of them that are laid before him in a supermarket's shelf! But nature is blind, and it will not stop calling human back, back home, back with the fold of the rest of the living creatures and out of his plunge in a world of micro and macro unnecessary pains that are caused by a torrential flooding of confusion and alienation: "Stop it!" that's what nature does each time the mind -the attention specifically- is driven by such imaginative pursuits that nature doesn't understand, and that's precisely what a depressed state is for: "stop being with pain, you stupid animal!"

Indeed from the perspective of nature we may appear to be retarded rather than intelligent animals, carrying upon our shoulders such weights as capable of splitting a mountain in half. But we never escape such pain like animals, nor understand it like saints; this is the great conundrum of human existence – we only complain about pain, fight it off with other afflictions, or escape from it into darker pains, or finally, stand still, and do nothing like the poor electrocuted rat! We never "stop being with pain", because we don't know how to understand ourselves, and how to stop being with our confused, conditioned selves which are the gate of pain. This is the great conundrum of human existence: nature won't stop calling us back, away from pain, by depressing all our painful attachments, but we won't go back to nature, nor transcend being human! This is the essence of the "human condition".

Such "human condition" has been the concern of every religion, philosophy, and science of human psychology and society without exception,

and understanding it is necessarily needed in order for one to be able just to begin to embark on the ultimate inquiry of finding the solution and answer, just as the right diagnosis of an illness is necessary to find the right cure. All inquiries into the "human condition" have started from the same premise, or simple observation, that there is something not quite right about that human condition, in that at most it is predominantly characterised by pain and suffering, and at least it is marred by some imperfection, if even just that which arises in the condition of being ignorant or doubtful about one's actual perfection, had it naturally existed one way or another, say, in a hedonist or fatalist contexts for example. There is thus also a shared conclusion drawn by all inquiries into the human condition: not only is human lacking in this or that way or to this or that extent, but also some *transcendental wisdom* can be realised by understanding what is it that human lacks; and not necessarily "transcendental" in a cosmological sense, but in the sense of *going beyond* human's natural ignorance of his own condition and of the deliverance therefrom.

The next step is to find the cure, if not to kill the disease and attain perfection, then at least to contain its destructive impact, that is, to bring human to the best possible condition. Propositions of such cure differed along with diagnostic variance, and they have been either transcendental, cosmological, or religious, such as Buddhism is par excellence, or mundane, that is, limited to the span of the lifetime of the individual¹⁶ and promoting psychological, sociological, or otherwise circumstantial solutions, without addressing such big questions as: What is the point of anything, including happiness and perfection, along with the quest to attain them, if all of this will finally be squandered by death? Why endure any suffering? And why commit to any cause or purpose? These are fundamentally questions about the meaning, value, and purpose of human life in philosophical terms, and in psychological terms, questions about motivation and effort.

Throughout human history many answers have been suggested: Since ancient times there have been *nihilistic* views arguing that there is no discernable purpose of human existence what so ever; any one phenomenon

¹⁶ In *The Denial of Death* (1973), Ernest Becker made the profound observation that mundane goals and missions psychologically represent to their pursuers, whether consciously or unconsciously, an equally "immortality project" as do transcendental goals to religious or spiritual pursuers.

is just as equally meaningless, valueless, and pointless, as any other, since they are all devoid of any lasting outcomes or effects. *Fatalism* adds to this the absence of any true freewill or choice in the first place: human existence being merely an ingredient floating about involuntarily in this great soup of the cosmos, with the individual in it being entirely predetermined and powerless. In connection with this there emerged in ancient Greece two most important experiential doctrines, *Cynicism and Stoicism*, which promoted a teleology of bliss or *ataraxia* comprised in exercising one's judgement and will in such a way as to bring to a condition of perfect harmony one's own nature with that of the cosmos, in every circumstance and every present moment. *Hedonism* on the other hand identifies sensorial and sexual pleasure as the self-evident goal of human existence, with nothing beyond it – the only difference between human and animal in this case being that human more skilfully and self-consciously creates and pursues more forms of pleasure and avoids every pain, and manages to bring about a situation of mental balance and wellbeing through a wise understanding and control of his hedonic experience. In ancient times there existed also a vibrant, though never popular *eristic* tradition, which employed dialectic and logical fallacies to contradict every assertion and doctrine and propose nothing much itself. Then from the rich and prolific European philosophical heritage after the Renaissance, we find a variety of views, many promoting *rationalism* as the means through which human finds an opportunity for individual and collective balance and wellbeing, and others, such as *existentialism*, promoting a genuine form of individualistic self-realisation and actualisation as the highest purpose of human existence. *Marxism* on the other hand promotes the materialisation of socio-political and socio-economic equality and justice as that which affords both the individual and society with true lasting freedom and independence; a position which is expanded to further levels of sophistication and complexity in *postmodernism*. Then there emerged more recently some concepts of a future transformation of the human condition itself, on the basis of what appears to be the exponential course of technological advancement that may be leading to a *singularity event*, or perhaps a gradual process of *transhumanism*, whereby human's physical and mental existence will be itself radically transformed, and thereby all our present ideas about human imperfection, including even human's susceptibility to death, will be no longer an issue!

Cosmological and religious traditions and cultures, on the other hand, reveal the extent by which the original condition of human imperfection is so deeply ingrained in the universal human psyche. In India as well as in some other cultures, for example, when a child is newly born and is perceived as such to be yet in a state of innocence, healthiness, freedom from the defilements of the world and therefore closest to perfection; his loving and caring parents will artificially imprint a dark-coloured mark of imperfection on his or her forehead so as to protect them from the cosmic forces which have themselves ordained the fundamental imperfection of human, and which could otherwise react by punishing or harming a child for the defiance of his or her perfect health or beauty.



Figure 10: The universal concept of the "evil eye" is a reference to the *cosmic snitch* that is constantly on the look for any state of perfection among humans, so as to report it to the powers that be, resulting at once in misfortune and destruction upon that which was only flourishing with goodness and wellness. The universality of the practice of protection against evil denotes the universality of the concept that: *to be human is to be imperfect*, and that one who aspires to attain perfection is doing so directly against the most original transcendental forces of evil in existence, and is bound to no less than sainthood or godhood upon his victory. Much of the high respect and difference which laypeople exhibit toward devoted religious practitioners comes from this ancient belief.

Thus, one of the most important practices in ancient religions is the worship or veneration of evil deities, which is usually puzzling to contemporary people, especially given that such reconciliatory stance in relation to evil is contradictory with the Semitic religions which will predominate later in history in most of the world. Ancient people sought a path of negotiation, accommodation, and coexistence with evil due to the humble and mature recognition that the normal human is weaker than to oppose or transcend their cosmic power, and that he is therefore likely to

fare more peacefully and safely across the journey of life by showing respect and avoiding defiance or confrontation with regard to them, even as he continues to principally obeys and worships the forces of good. Ancient people observed that such cosmic evil was something that is inherent in nature and from which there was no escape, and not only as it manifested itself in natural events such as storms, floods, draughts, and earthquakes, but also socially and psychologically, in the hurtful and disruptive behaviours which were visible even in the mindless animals, and more so in the reason-endowed human, such as killing, stealing, adultery, and such like behaviours in reaction to which the prohibitive moral and legal commandments of god and king were laid down, so as to prevent both the individual and society from falling even further away from the state of imperfection into that of vice and misery.

This humble understanding of the human condition led to two significant features of transcendental doctrines which distinguish them from mundane ones. First is the recognition of the fact that instead of reaching perfection, human is rather strongly susceptible to further deterioration; the result of which was the birth of the universal spiritual principles and standards of motivation and effort as characterised by withdrawal, abstinence, restraint, and self-abnegation, rather than their mundane counterparts: pursuing, possessing, indulging, fighting and competing. The second feature which distinguish transcendental doctrines was the recognition of a cosmological or transcendental origin of the condition of evil and suffering (suffering as "*lakkhana*"), and therewith the necessity of finding the solution to the human condition in an equally transcendental or cosmological level, thus, the necessity of *the transcendence of death*, and the arrival of human, his soul, consciousness, or whatever essence that makes him human, into some state of perfection that will thereafter be no more disrupted by decay and dissolution; thus, *amata*, non-death, or eternity.

And though religions and transcendental doctrines differed in many significant ways in their descriptions of these key variables: What is that human essence? What it needs to '*do*' in order to become delivered from its imperfection? And what is it that constitutes perfection or eternity? – yet and with only few exceptions, they all agreed that deliverance comes by means of *awakening* to one's inward benevolent or wise essence, and to embrace such to resist or overcome evil as it manifests through *one's own*

individual existence rather than circumstantially in the external world. Thus spiritual transcendental doctrines mostly agree that the evil that manifests in the world is one that cannot be overcome, but at the same time declare the meaning of life and define deliverance in inward psychological terms as the overcoming of evil within one's own heart.

This very brief and concise summarisation of these mundane and transcendental diagnoses and solutions regarding the human condition does not represent the full range of reasons and subtleties associated with their arguments. It is also important to note that certain aspects of these various views and propositions often converge and intersect at various points, and across both ancient and modern times, and transcendental and mundane ideas. For example, many Judeo-Christian religious principles manifest themselves throughout western philosophy, and are sometimes consciously incorporated with such rational or abstract views as in Cartesian, Kantian and Hegelian philosophy, or even more vividly in the profound existentialism of the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

The description of a spiritual and transcendental dimension and significance of the individual's life, irrespective of its cosmological ramifications, is one which the Buddha applies also to *nibbāna* or Buddhist salvation, as a form of transcendental ultimate unsurpassed bliss and purpose that is *causa sui* or *self-justifying* in the confines of the one lifetime of the individual. But we shall soon see how the Buddha also emphasised the importance of contextualising such transcendental pursuit in a bigger cosmological context, and how both mundane and transcendental understandings and faith exercise a significant impact on the generation of motivation and effort in human. This is the junction at which a *secular Buddhism* develops, departs from and antagonises what it regards as "traditional" Buddhism. So often the argument made here is that the highest or ultimate bliss which the Buddha's teachings offer the individual is strictly psychological and involves no transcendental or cosmological dimensions. And though it is indeed true that the psychological benefits associated with Buddhist practice are so great and far-reaching as to make them worthy of cultivation in any case and context, yet in principle the dismissal of the transcendental and cosmological dimensions and ramifications of such practice reduces *nibbāna* or emancipation to a "feel-good" experience that differs only marginally from the *ataraxias* of Cynicism, Stoicism, or even

hedonism. Further, it is questionable whether we can even consider it to be "true", that nibbāna is a bliss *of that kind*, or as we shall investigate soon, whether it is even attainable by one who does not see beyond "feeling", and beyond the "person" that will grasp hold of the reward of good-feeling. For certainly, by the time a person is even close to attaining nibbāna, he has realised by then that no bliss is blissful if it simply ended with death, or failed to transcend it, and that that which is only temporary or fleeting cannot possibly be regarded as blissful, let alone being the highest bliss.

But before delving further into all these questions, we shall at first take a detour and have a brief look on the life of Siddharatha Gautama, the birth-name of the man who was to become the Buddha, and how he went forth seeking the ultimate truth about the human condition and the liberation therefrom, and how "suffering" and its overcoming, in the most purely psychological rather than circumstantial sense, finally came to occupy the most central and vital place in his own spiritual journey.

3.2 The Buddha's Rising

The Buddha is believed to have been born sometime around mid-6th century BCE, in a wealthy and powerful family of the Shakyan clan which extended through present day Nepal and north India. It is said that he was being prepared by his father to replace him as a high official or perhaps even the chieftain of the clan. This however was a time of great religious freedom and vigorous intellectual activity in India, and everywhere around the Buddha's birth place was to be found a big host of spiritual and intellectual schools and traditions of many various kinds. Though the Buddha had had a wife and one child, and led a luxurious pleasurable life, he eventually decided to leave all this behind and felt drawn to lead another form of spiritual life that was known in India at the time: the life of the *Śramana*: the wandering, contemplative, ascetic renunciate mendicant.

The *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* details how after the Buddha had gone forth, he learnt meditation with two noteworthy teachers at the time and mastered their practice to its farthest extent, and the *Mahāsihanāda-sutta* shows the Buddha following the practice of what clearly appears to be that of the *Jaina*, an older distinct order of ascetic mendicants and whose religion thrives till the present (Jainism). Living in utter seclusion, the Buddha subjected himself to the most excruciating forms of self-abnegation, including extreme bodily mortification. The Buddha eventually left that practice behind and, having exhausted the exploration of the teachings and practices that were available around him, he finally went in the forest on his own. The text explains the Buddha's repeated departure from those teachings and practices, and which he mastered, on the basis that he found them to lead to no true final emancipation. It is not clear whether the Buddha had had a pre-established idea about what constituted such emancipation, or whether he was simply following the various teachings that were available around him until he witnessed their final results, and then made an evaluation of those results. The latter appears to me to be the case, as the text describes in some detail the Buddha's dissatisfaction with the imperfection and subtle grossness which continued to mar the bliss of meditation, and the fruitlessness of the practice of self-mortification. But it may also be the case that what the Buddha was seeking, and which he from the beginning identified with true and final emancipation, was no less than the end of any

form of discontent or dissatisfaction; a state of the total absence of any form of mental suffering or affliction, which as we shall see became precisely the fundamental aspect and purpose of his own teachings.

In all cases, the text continues reporting that after the Buddha went on his own, with nothing to refer to as a guide except his own mind: one evening the Buddha sat down in the meditative posture at the foot of a fig tree and vowed never to move from that spot, no matter what suffering befell him, until he realised that ultimate or final emancipation that he was seeking and that he believed exists. Endowed with such powerful faith, determination, and self-awareness, the Buddha was able to endure excruciating forms of bodily and mental pain which did not cease to assail him throughout the night, and remained unmoved in the face of every wild and ferocious mental temptation to frustrate his intent and persistence in order to mobilise him from his spot, and finally succeeded in reaching his goal before day break.

When the Buddha emerged from this experience, he could no longer feel any form of mental pain or suffering whatsoever, and his awareness became wholly and completely detached, freed, and liberated from both what is experienced and that which experiences, that is, the sense of self or ego that is tightly associated with bodily, sensorial, and mental being. And though he still existed in the world and was fully aware of its manifestations both sensorially and conceptually, yet none of these could now exercise any emotional impact on his liberated consciousness, nor condition his motivation in natural ways. His attention became free from the slightest emotional compulsions, even in the event of exposure to extreme and sustained bodily pain, and his motivation no longer followed spontaneously and automatically in response to either pleasure and pain, or dangers and opportunities. This was the ultimate victory and accomplishment of Siddharatha Gautama, now the Wholly Awakened Buddha, and he spent the following fifty years of his life on this earth teaching and training others to realise the same awakening and freedom from all suffering for themselves and by themselves.

We will now cast a look on the cosmological dimensions that are associated with this Buddhist soteriology, and henceforth we have to keep in mind that it is here that Mahayana Buddhism differs in very important ways from Theravada or early Buddhism, a matter which will be discussed further

below. But first we have to heed with the closest attention how this Buddhist emancipation is entirely dependent on the experiential realisation of a *psychological state* by the individual. As an *idea*, Buddhist emancipation may be significantly cosmological, but as a *practice* it is entirely psychological and experiential, and it is basically comprised in the liberating of the consciousness from the clutches of nature and of its evolutionary forces. Thus, the overturning of Oblivion is not merely a matter of acquisition of knowledge about the human condition, but rather the experiential freedom from it. The mere recognition that one is only a marionette that is being mobilised by nature is only a necessary first-step in the journey of emancipation from nature, including human nature; the final deliverance from such nature involves further exercise of attention and effort.

Most of us who encounter this definition of emancipation for the first time wonder whether such radical freedom and independence from nature is at all possible, and if it was, then what kind of unhuman determination and how much tremendous effort it takes to accomplish it. For the Buddha however the inquiry went backwards, and this is partly why his Awakening is regarded as a miraculous feat: The Buddha realised this emancipation *first*, before knowing what it was or what to expect from it, and only afterwards did he contemplate its nature and reality, and what it took to realise it. The result was the corpus of the Buddha's most precious conceptual and practical teachings, which we so luckily find preserved in two main sources: First in the considerably ambiguous and incomplete form of the Pāli texts, and second in the recorded teachings of various practitioners who carried out the practice by themselves and interpreted and re-expressed various aspects of the teachings in their own different languages and styles. These two significant sources together help us develop a fuller understanding of the experience of Buddha's Awakening more than 2500 years ago, though the argument has more than one leg to stand on, which says that much has also been lost, and that our present understanding may well be limited and lacking in various respects.

The final important aspect to appreciate regarding the understanding of the Buddha's experience of deliverance, is the idea that the Buddha himself *finds out* about it, *discovers* the natural path of gnosis and psychological development which leads to it. Firstly this removes from the Buddha's

experience any element of magic or supernatural revelation, and retains him firmly in the order of humans, without a hint of propheticness or apotheosis. Though certain later forms of Buddhism will reinterpret the Buddha's Awakening through precisely these other-worldly features, the utter humanness of Buddha is further confirmed in the successful realisation of the same Awakening which he experienced by others who trained under him. According to the Pāli text, the uniqueness of Buddha does not even manifest in how he was "the first" to realise such Awakening, but rather simply in how he was the one we know of, and basically because he devoted his life to convey his experience to others and establishing a successful monastic order that survives to this day. Though in nearly every religion the uniqueness of the founder of that religion is emphasised and pronounced, as either the first or last to proclaim the ultimate truth and reveal the righteous path; the Pāli text shows none of the like, and lists Gautama Buddha, the *historical* Buddha, simply as one in a series of other self-awakened teachers who existed before him, and who will continue to manifest in the future, in what is clearly an intrinsic feature of the Buddhist cosmological infinite existence. The text goes further in confirming the utter neutrality and naturalness of both the experience of deliverance and the path which leads to it, by affirming the existence of *pacceka-buddhas*, those who are also self-awakened just as the Buddha, but only never *show up* after their transcendental deliverance, and of whom we therefore never know or hear, though they may perhaps be present around us!

3.3 The Buddhist Meaning of Life

The thing about "transcendence" is that it is the only way through which we can truly understand anything intuitively and with certainty and without hesitation, confusion, or doubt. A fish does not understand what water is, because it is continually encompassed by it; a frog does! A human with his conditioned mind does not understand what suffering is, because he is continually encompassed by it; a liberated Buddha does! The thing about the frog is that, unlike the fish, it can make sense of its experience out of the water, it can experience no-water or the absence of water, and that separation from water enables it to perceive the existence of water as an element of nature that has its own independence from the frog's own existence; and what the Buddha realised after his emancipation was that human is precisely like a fish, and suffering the ocean. Only, because of our sensorial and hedonic Oblivion, we never regard *experience* as suffering or recognise it as such; we rather see it as *our* natural world, *our* feelings, and *our* existence – even "others" we are unable to see as others, but mostly as *others-in-relation-to-ourselves!* This prison-like delusion of the ego, and which is itself the most subtle invention of nature and which ensures the self-obsession of the living organism, blinds it to the various forms and intensities of suffering that are inherent in the very fabric of existence and experience. Much of what I have presented in the previous parts of this book was aiming at demonstrating how this is the case, and how suffering is something that is intrinsically infused in our natural bodies and evolutionary minds.

This is where things usually get a bit confusing for many people: The text sometimes uses the word "*dukkha*" as a reference to circumstantial forms of pain or affliction, like injury or grief; but the same word is also used to refer to the ultimate and existential form of suffering from which one finally becomes emancipated, far beyond what "suffering" conventionally means. "Dukkha" in this latter sense encompasses all forms, all moments, and all possibilities, of *conditioned existence and experience*. For the Buddha it did not matter what one is, a human or a god or an animal or a ghost; all are fundamentally unfree, bound, moved by strings and conditioned by natural forces that they cannot even see, let alone control, and as such their existence is only a display of different forms and types of marionettes, mobilised and

animated by the subtle prowess of nature, on the great theatrical stage of Samsara. No matter what one is and what one did, one is plunged deeply in a state of hopeless oblivion and blindness, deprived of the slightest and most basic freedom, until one has finally seen, known, and understood the forces of nature which have been mobilising him since birth, and for no real purpose aside from procreation, and toward no end other than death. This is what the Buddha refers to when he describes every experience, including what we customarily regard as happiness or *normalcy*, to be intrinsically mired in "dukkha" – not suffering per se, but uncertainty, change, transformation and flux; thus, *conditionality*.

The Buddha saw this picture in its most vivid completeness a very long time ago, and unlike the many other diagnoses of the human condition which prevailed in his time and today, the Buddha went so far as to identify "conditioned existence" itself, in all its forms, as the ultimate root of suffering. The Buddha's statement: "aging, illness, and decay, are due to birth" may appear to some so self-evident and self-explanatory to a ridiculous extent, but the profound and important message therein is that, as soon as one becomes existent in a world of conditions, as soon as pain and servitude begin, and last, until they finally lead to nothing but death, without a mundane chance of true freedom or repose, but only transcendental way-outs. It is at this very point that we can finally see how the psychological, experiential dimension of emancipation, is concomitant with a cosmological dimension, and how the two are inseparable. Even as one gradually progresses on the psychological experiential path, one's conditioned existence in this world of manifestation is simultaneously and gradually vanishing! Emancipation, thus, is a process; something that is *happening*, and nibbāna or final deliverance is the moment when this process of emancipation is done happening. In this sense, we are experiencing our emancipation and witnessing it in the course of time, unfolding before our very awareness, and truly resulting in such substantial and radical transformation in one's psychological experience that, not only oneself, but even others can witness and discern. Just as in Cynicism and Stoicism, the Buddha relied on this *experiential verifiability* of the truth which he proclaimed in order to convince others of its utter reality, and often enticed and motivated them to test its validity in their own experience. Thus the effects of this truth were declared to be "readily visible, substantial and

lasting, demonstrable, goal-oriented, realisable by those endowed with good sense, for themselves and by themselves."¹⁷

At this point it becomes quite evident how the Buddha, seeking an ultimate end to no less than conditioned existence, is unable to suffice with any *idea* or *concept* that could bestow any meaning, purpose, or value, upon conditioned living and dying. This is precisely what the Buddha had the faith and determination to seek when he sat under the fig tree that glorious night: the actual, experiential end of that profound existential suffering and servitude, rather than to come up with some cognitive idea that could help him make sense of the purpose of his fleeting human life. This attitude decisively separates the Buddha's truth from the host of mundane doctrines which ever existed in the world, and certainly makes it quite unique among those other transcendental and cosmological ones, especially given that he did not fail to achieve his goal that night! One of the most common misconceptions about Buddhism is that it is a *nihilist* doctrine. This misconception is understandable, given the Buddha's categorical rejection of any substantial meaning or purpose of human life apart from the single goal of overcoming existence itself, and not by any particular form or mode of being in it, but psychologically by becoming completely detached, dispassionate, and unstimulated with regard to it, and cosmologically by no less than vanishing eternally from it! The argument of nihilism would have stood if the Buddha had died that night; only then could one say that this was a man who couldn't make sense of life or find any true meaning, purpose, or value in it, and so he ended up dying as he sought to escape life's suffering through some transcendental fantasy. But the point, and the utterly inspiring one at that, is that it was with tremendous sense of purpose that the Buddha sat under the fig tree that night, and it was precisely through this miraculous motivation and singleness-of-mind, that he managed to endure the excruciating pain and remain unmoved by nature's tormenting enticements, and sustain his attention and effort under such extremely debilitating and depleting circumstances, in order to precisely make sense of existence and of the purpose of his own being in it. Again, the whole point is that he did not fail that night; and it is only because of his incredible victory that we speak of any Buddhism today.

¹⁷ These are the stable attributes of the Buddha's truth, doctrine, or teaching: "svākhāto bhagavatā dhammo sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opāyiko paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi."

Further, it is not clear whether the Buddha believed in "rebirth" or not before his Awakening, and though the events were taking place in ancient India, mind you that atheist, materialist and agnostic views were also flourishing at that time, perhaps even more than what we may find today. We have already seen how the Buddha, cautious and independent in his inquiry, is not one who is given to rely too much on conceptualisation and ideation in his quest after what is true, and we must keep in mind that the Buddha's discovery of the truth, rather than creation of it, unfolded only after the event of his Awakening, and there is every reason for us to consider that he did not necessarily believe in anything before that, except that salvation was possible and that the pursuit of it was worthy of his effort. Thus though the Buddha may have been initially agnostic regarding rebirth and the transmigration of consciousness, he did not surrender to nihilism, and instead sustained his opposition to a meaningless life, and faith and optimism in overcoming such terrible, all-encompassing meaninglessness imposed by the eventuality of death, and thereby finally succeeded in mustering the purpose and energy with which to accomplish that very transcendence and salvation.

The text however leaves no place for doubt that the reality of rebirth became evident to the Buddha immediately following his Awakening, and shows the Buddha later strongly criticising as futile and inutile those mundane doctrines which sought to conceptualise a purpose of life without concerning themselves with how such purpose will transcend death and will not be squandered by it. It seems true that that which delivered the Buddha from the snare of nihilism and meaninglessness was precisely his faith that suffering can be overcome, and that death, the crown of suffering, can be transcended. Without such possibility and promise of deliverance from conditioned existence, nothing remains other than the inherent suffering of mundane living and death; precisely the thing against which the Buddha struggled and which he sought to overcome. And since a path was found, a path was discovered, that effectively led to that very freedom from conditioned existence; Buddhism, then, couldn't possibly be neither mundane, nor nihilist.

But what exactly is rebirth?!

3.4 *Anatta* : Rebirth and the Lack of Selfhood

A creature is made-up of a set of unique bodily and mental functions and features; when it passes away from life upon the dissolution and break up of these functions, that creature is now forever lost, as a creature with those unique bodily and mental features and characteristics. But the formless consciousness of this creature, and which used to mobilise it and afford it with life and sentience, is indestructible, and it is a cosmological phenomenon, an element woven into the fabric of manifested existence itself (*sankhāra* → *viññāna*) and that continues to float about through it, propelled forward in time through its sheer momentum, with no counter force to stop it or influence its course, and thus passes through the death of one creature with not the slightest alteration, only to re-materialise through the formation of another being (*viññāna* → *nāmarūpa*), and so forth again and again across incalculable rounds of life and death. Thus consciousness is not a thing or an entity, but a spontaneous process of nature, and its relation to the mental and physical attributes of the living creature would be very much like the unmanifested immutable laws of gravitation which determine the behaviour of a spherical object in space. The consciousness carries within itself, or is perhaps made out of the amalgam of psychological and mental functions which it itself bestows upon the body and arouses it with life thereby. These fundamental evolutionary mental functions, on the basis of which operates the host of hedonic, emotional and cognitive memories and habits (*vedanā/saññā-upādānakhandā*), themselves constitute the nature of consciousness and are themselves what makes the momentum (or fuel) that propels it forward in time indefinitely. And as the creature thus lives, and thinks and feels and acts; the creature is itself the medium through which the consciousness manifests and unfolds. Thus the consciousness is not only indestructible, but is also in a state of continual flux.

Though the physical attributes of the creature which later form around that continually unfolding consciousness is not identical with or necessarily even similar to the one that died, yet the *psyche* of the two creatures, on the other hand, is strictly nothing but a *continuum*. The psychological attributes of the creature at the moment of death is precisely what we mean by "*karma*" in Buddhism; these psychological attributes will be reborn intact in the subsequent materialisation of consciousness, and will be the inheritance

of the newly born creature, and though these inherited psychological attributes may possibly shape certain elements of its forming body, they will constitute the entirety of its hedonic, emotional, and cognitive inclinations and habitual behaviours and reactions from the moment of conception onwards. Ample evidence exists which demonstrates how unique body-marks of children acquired at birth can be traced to their violent death in the previous life, and which they happen to remember, including dual body-marks denoting entry and exist wounds. This then strongly suggests that, next to the genetic factors of a creature's ancestry, a *further force* exists which contributes to the shaping and formation of its bodily and mental conditions and predispositions, including possibly the susceptibility to certain ailments or illnesses, or propensity to certain habits: this force is "karma", and which may also be the Buddhist (and generally Indian cosmological) answer to the scientifically unanswered question: how and why two identical twins with the exact same genetic make-up who are born and raised in the same environment, develop different tastes, inclinations, health conditions, and aptitudes.

Western science seeks to discover the laws by which natural processes arise and unfold, but the manner with which it establishes certainty with regard to scientific truth is, understandably, by demonstrating empirically how these laws operate *each time* something happens. That not all of us remember any event from the previous sojourns of our inherited consciousness, is sufficient to cast a shadow of serious doubt on the reality and truth of rebirth. But our forgetfulness of our past lives cannot be regarded as evidence of the absence of any such lives, in just the same way as our forgetfulness of our infancy or early childhood in this very life does not negate their existence. Memory itself is a process that is embedded in our indestructible consciousness and traverses ceaselessly along with it from life to life, and as it is mostly unreliable for most of us in the one life, especially as we age, it is then even more so across many lives. But apparently all that it takes for one to remember a past life is to be endowed with an active and robust attention and memory in it, and that readily explains why a significant number of those who do remember their past life do so when they have died in it at a young age, or in traumatic circumstances that are naturally hard to forget. At the same time the ample evidence that we now possess from the many cases whose previous lives have been verified and

confirmed, thanks to the work of the late Dr. Ian Stevenson and his colleagues who continue to document more and more cases from around the globe, renders any categorical dismissal of rebirth to be itself the one dogmatic and unscientific attitude!



Figure 11: Dr. Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) the founder of scientific research in rebirth, and author of *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects*. 1997. *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*. 4 vols. 1975-1983. *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type*. 2003. Among other works. See also Jim B. Tucker, *Life Before Life: A Scientific Investigation of Children's Memories of Previous Lives*. 2005. Tom Shroder, *Old Souls: The Scientific Search for Proof of Past Lives*. 1999.

It is obvious how this reality of rebirth exercises a significant impact on our self-understanding and contemplation of the meaning and purpose of life, and thereby also on our motivation and effort in it. Nothing, it seems, is squandered by death, and the consciousness traverses across it only to re-materialise in another body and unfold in another life. We can neither say that this new future life is still ours, nor say that it will have nothing to do with us! And then what of this consciousness: Is it ours or does it belong to the other?! If we identify with the consciousness then it is we that are always reborn and never die, and if we identify with our unique individual life-form then our very consciousness is not our true self! In the first case we become eternalists and in the second, nihilists. The Buddha is said to have accomplished the feat of his Awakening precisely by maintaining an attitude of estrangement and alienation with regard to both his own consciousness and his own life-form; the result was the evaporation of the ego! It is the ego that relates to things through "I", "me" and "mine"; it does not know how to relate to anything other than in this self-obsessed manner, and that is why it is exceedingly difficult for anyone who is not yet Awakened, to intuitively grasp a state of existence where neither consciousness nor life-form, nor anything else for that matter, are being identified as one's self! That is why attempts to describe both *nibbāna* and *anatta* have often failed to convey any vibrant reality.

It is here that the scientifically transcendent attitude of Buddha appears most vividly, and indeed the extent of a practitioner's estrangement and curiosity with regard to his own existence becomes very similar to those with which a scientist examines a foreign life-form under the microscope, without feeling the slightest personal connection to it. One does no longer relate to one's own life and activity with a sense of belonging or self-identification, except in those moments when the practice is abandoned or forgotten, or overwhelmed by habitual natural impulses where Oblivion reigns supreme, and the scientist-practitioner attitude becomes suspended. This curious situation of estrangement with regard to the consciousness can best be described as similar to that of a scientist who is examining and investigating O₂ or Oxygen as a gaseous molecule, and is as such totally aware of it as a substance that is foreign to and separate from his own existence, yet his very life concomitantly depends on breathing it continually, habitually, and self-unconsciously, at the same time as he examines it. Likewise, the practitioner attempts to dispassionately examine the ego and unravel Oblivion but he is still continually under their emotional and cognitive sway, and the ego continues to evaluate all experiences, including that of the dispassionate examination of the ego, based on their hedonic and emotional impact, and responds to all experiences based on a desire to control their course and outcomes.

This is how the ego is so much mingled along with oblivion, as its self-obsessed evaluations continuously prevent one precisely from being able to see reality dispassionately and independently from desire and fear. The ego is so profound, far-reaching, and pervasive, to the extent that it may be identified with life itself. But unlike emotions, it is rather extremely skilled in hiding, mostly behind the most subtle subliminal thoughts and memories, which is precisely what makes it readily capable of dominating the awareness so long it has developed *any* desire, whatever the object of desire may be, and even if it was a desire to be pious or morally righteous for example, or even a desire to transcend the ego itself! We see this very frequently in the course of practice, and not only at an early stage of it; that the practitioner is unable to relate to deliverance in any way other than as a personal gain or achievement, and as if suffering and its overcoming are both personal experiences. The ego picks up the desire to transcend the ego and makes a home for itself out of it, reinforces itself through it, rendering that very

desire to transcend the ego a hindrance to transcending the ego! Thus the venerable Sāriputta, chief disciple of Buddha, tells another monk that the very egoist thought "I haven't yet attained deliverance" is itself a hindrance to the attainment of such deliverance.¹⁸ Thus in order for one to realise emancipation it does not suffice to simply know or believe in the situation of estrangement and non-identification with the ego or any sense of self, but human must exercise his mental faculties in such a way as to bring this sense of self to a final end in experience rather than just in concept. For it is only when the ego actually dies, that the last layer of Oblivion becomes finally removed, and it is for a good reason that Sufis refer to Oblivion as "*Al-hijab*", "the Veil", the removal of which not only allows, but forces one to fully and clearly see the reality of one's own lacking existence, and to taste of the freedom of deliverance therefrom.

And so in order to bring about such transcendental cessation of ego, Buddhist practice goes by a path of *nibbidā* and *virāga*, a thorough estrangement, disenchantment, and dispassion with regard to the entire spectrum of one's own naturally conditioned psychological and behavioural responses. But the Buddhist texts refer to this process of practice and training, and progress, and even faith, gnosis and salvation, as something that unfolds *gradually*, which makes Buddhist soteriology not a heaven or hell, salvation or nothing scenario! This news is very heartening to those who wish to become emancipated but at the same time recognise how hard it is to deny one's ego in such a final manner and to such a total extent; and the adept or devoted practitioner gradually experiences an increasing realisation of the absence of ego. Though at this point the practitioner indeed reaps the incomparable psychological fruits of this progress and sees the truth and effects of Buddhist practice directly in his own experience, soon, and as deeper or more fundamental layers of ego, and of oblivion, impress themselves on the awareness or become exposed under its light, new, more transcendental insights begin to emerge, and they pose serious challenges to the practitioner's cognition, emotion, motivation and effort.

The slightest liberation of attention and awareness from the firm clutches of ego directly results in a heightened degree of self-understanding,

¹⁸ At *Dutiyaanuruddha-sutta* (AN 3.130): "Yampi te, āvuso anuruddha, evaṃ hoti: 'atha ca pana me nānupādāya āsavehi cittaṃ vimuccatī'ti, idaṃ te kukkuccasmiṃ'."

and in a strictly *Stoic* fashion, one begins to see and relate to one's own experiences as a series of *impersonal* events, and as natural occurrences which are unfolding in the world of manifestation according to immutable laws and principles, with one's own existence in it being only another variable or medium of nature, rather than an independent force or agent that mobilises itself or other things, or exercises any meaningful influence on them. Thus, the natural difference or separation between "self" and "world", and also "self" and "other", begins to dissipate or lose its sharpness gradually, and this being a universally recognised hallmark of spiritual development. What it experientially means is that, in as much as one recognises oneself as a conditioned marionette, one concomitantly recognises everything else likewise, and the delusions of "intentionality" or "agency", or even "purpose" and "rationality", cease to justify any action or event, and thereby neutralise their cognitive and emotional impact.

In this state of awareness, nothing is personal, everything is impersonal, and with the reality of rebirth in mind, the practitioner finally discerns that the fear and lust and self-stimulation and depression, and the entire spectrum of suffering which he experiences, do not belong to him, but to the karma that has brought about and fashioned his existence. In other words, the suffering which a creature experiences has its origins in *cosmological sources*, rather than personal ones, and when a creature experiences suffering it is then experiencing a fundamentally cosmological phenomenon that is only manifesting through its individual existence. If the fear I am experiencing at one point, and which exercises physiological effects on my body and psychological effects on my mind, and over which I have no control, will transmigrate after my death along with manifold other mental qualities, and finally be experienced by many other creatures later on; then it exists in a transcendental, non-personal form. This is what the Mahayana mean when they say that karma and suffering are "collective", that is, "impersonal" and "cosmological": We as individuals are just consuming the oblivion, stimulation, imagination, and suffering of creatures that lived before us, and whose karma we inherited, as if regurgitating it upon birth and vomiting it out upon death for others to swallow in turn – and on and on goes the cycle, endlessly. That much indeed we might regard ourselves personally *not responsible* for our own suffering, and might as a result wonder why should we bother doing anything about it, especially given that

it will be "I" that does all the effort and toil that it takes to bring that suffering to an end, and then it will be precisely "not-I" that reaps the fruits of this end of suffering, given the impersonal nature of deliverance. There is no way to respond to this apparent paradox without a sound foundation in cosmological understanding, and it is here that the doctrinal differences between the two great Buddhist traditions get really interesting and curious!

According to Buddhist soteriology, upon the final ending of suffering, it will then seem as if suffering doesn't exist and never existed; one has in fact only transcended Oblivion, and the imagination which conditions one to substantiate experience and react to it emotionally and thereby suffer; suffering therefore doesn't exist independently from the oblivious imagination of mind. A fully liberated human knows this experientially, that is, he experiences no suffering anymore, and thereby knows first-hand that suffering is nowhere to be found in and of itself independently from the conditioned reactions of the egotist self-obsessed mind. Thus the delusional concept "I'm suffering" or "there is suffering" have come to an end through the existence of the *arahant*, the fully delivered Buddhist saint; he can spit out no such egotist delusion for another creature to swallow upon their birth; some line or continuity has been broken and will not be connected ever again.

The Mahayana contend that this Theravadin emancipation, though real, yet is of no purport or significance, neither to the individual that simply *vanishes* from any form of conditioned existence upon the attainment of final deliverance, nor cosmologically, in any way which benefits other unfree creatures or exercises any general cosmological impact of any kind. The Mahayana therefore surmised that, if suffering was impersonal and universal, so too must be the emancipation thereof. The deliverance of an individual meant nothing for anybody, including to that individual himself, since upon his deliverance he no longer really exists as an individual! Nothing is removed from or added to the cosmic interplay of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth, through the destruction of conditioned existence in the inward psychological experience of any single creature, and aside from the total alleviation of suffering which the delivered creature experiences, *nibbāna* was an event that *cosmologically* had neither impact nor ramification of any kind. That suffering exists only in so far as that phantom and delusion of selfhood exists, and that the consciousness that arrives at

nibbāna is precisely such that no longer belongs to or affects any psychological person or entity, as we have seen, are ideas that are deeply challenging to a consciousness that is still conditioned by a lingering sense of self, and which cannot cognitively summon its attentional and motivational resources without that very lingering sense of self, and to whom nibbāna as an impersonal reality can easily cease to make much or any *motivational sense*.

We are at a junction where the absence of personhood is posing very serious challenges to the practitioner's understanding, faith, and motivation! At an early stage of practice one's persistent sense of self has been generating and mobilising the practitioner to pursue deliverance as a personal gain; but given progress in practice, this very layer of egotist self-obsession has been transcended along with all its corresponding energy and logic, and such transcendence could only leave vacant the rational foundation upon which the practitioner's faith and motivation conditionally rest. One can imagine monks arriving precisely at this junction and pondering precisely this paradox sometime after the departure of Buddha from this world of manifestation, with some of them relying habitually on the power of reasoning and conceptualisation, and coming thereby firmly to the conclusion that the nibbāna taught by Buddha represented only a "conventional" form of emancipation that was suitable to the limited understanding of unenlightened practitioners, and that to them, advanced and deep in practice as they are, such nibbāna did no longer represent a meaningful emancipation that succeeded in drawing forth their faith and motivation, and that therefore, a more advanced and transcendental understanding is needed to penetrate to the "ultimate" truth and present the "higher" emancipation; the Bodhisattva path is born!

The bodhisattva is a being that aspires to reach such excellence and deliverance of mind as would make him (or her) identical with an arahant; only, he does not seek to cross the threshold of nibbāna and thereby doesn't vanish from existence, and he even trains in the course of his life in order to know how not to cross that threshold when it finally becomes within reach. The idea is that he will not vanish so as not to squander his superb and rare wisdom and compassion, and will rather live on through the successive cycles of life and death, free from suffering and desire, using his skills industriously and tirelessly to help others, until the last conditioned creature

has become likewise emancipated. In my view this Mahayana soteriological idea is the noblest of all, but precisely, only *as an idea*, or perhaps even a *revelation* or *prophecy* of some distant, future event of collective emancipation, and this being the thing which differentiates it most from Theravada's individualistic nibbāna, being an on-going lived experience which directly supports one's faith in its *proximate* reality.

The *reactionary* conceptual exercise of the Mahayana manifests itself instantly in their obsession with anatta (or *sunyata*) and cognitive "*dualism*", all of which finally reflects itself in the conceptual nature of their soteriology, which was very much the solution or way-out regarding the challenge of an impersonal suffering and emancipation: The *universalising* of both suffering and liberation was precisely the highly intelligent means by which the pursuit of such an uncompromisingly impersonal and selfless deliverance could again become meaningful and valuable to those who were reviewing it from within the mundane web rather than from without it. Of course, to pursue nibbāna as an experience that cannot possibly be truly known in its fullest reality until it has been reached, requires also a certain "leap of faith" on the part of the Theravadin; but in his attempt to solve the challenging and confusing mystery of an impersonal deliverance, the Mahayanist seem to have devised an alternative emancipatory scenario that is, though conceptually graspable, yet requires an even greater faith-leap and with nothing in his own experience to support its reality or even probability, which in turn only introduces a further challenge to personal motivation and effort rather than reinforce them! For the universalisation of suffering and emancipation necessarily negates the significance of personal motivation and ambition, in the sense that whatever that the person will here accomplish must be identified with a universal impact or fruit and not separate or independent from it. That is why "compassion" is so emphatically prioritised in Mahayana, because without a tremendous cognitive identification with the goal of liberating others, there is nothing left for the Mahayanist that could anymore stimulate motivation and effort.

This differs significantly from Theravada practice, where a personal motivation to attain nibbāna is regarded as a necessary process in the journey which eventually reaches its terminus at the cessation of any sense of personhood. Many similes are offered in the Pāli text to describe that process, most famously that of the 'raft', which one uses to cross a river but

then leaves it behind once the crossing is done. Our lingering sense of self, and our personal sense of motivation, are just like that raft and by means of which we finally attain salvation as we leave it behind. The Theravada thus, supported by ample references from the Pāli text, pay close attention to the phase of practice where one's karmic and compulsive sense of self still persists, and regards the individual's full experiential realisation of anatta as the goal. The Mahayana on the other hand see this path as one that places too much emphasis on basic or conventional levels of spiritual awakening, and place their emphasis rather on the deliverance of every sentient being. It is for this reason that Mahayana often snub Theravada as the "Hinayāna"; a "basic" or even "inferior" practice that leads to a lower form of salvation. Though essentially, both traditions agree that deliverance from the clutches of ego and of nature are necessary, and they both place emphasis on the practice of meditative self-awareness, estrangement, dispassion, and renunciation, as the means by which to achieve this deliverance; yet the Theravadin persists at this task seeking to attain perfection in it and pursues no other, while the Mahayanist, in addition to this task which he regards as somewhat basic, vows to pursue the bodhisattva path and trains to become perpetually and compassionately concerned for the deliverance of all beings; and part of this training is to prevent himself from going into nibbāna or vanishing.

Indeed, in contrast with this sunny and futuristic collective liberation of Mahayana, we find the dark and down-to-earth description of nature or Samsara in Theravada, as a primordial sphere of perpetual and renewed existence, with every living being in it driven to procreate and replicate its genes, and the escape from which can be accomplished only through the difficult and rare inclination to abstinence and renunciation of the most thorough kind, an undertaking that can be expected only from the few rather than the many. Going forth in this renunciate path, persisting in it with contentment, and succeeding in pursuing with it correctly to attain nibbāna, are all considered by Venerable Sāriputta to be "rather difficult things" to accomplish for any one, let alone for everyone.¹⁹ And in light of the absence of any evidence or indication of a steady increase in the number or manifestation of awakened or even restrained people around us in the world or in history, it is then at least justifiable to regard Mahayana's collective

¹⁹ *Dukkarapañhā-sutta* (SN 38.16).

emancipation as a mere idea that, though is beautiful and noble, yet is merely an idea, and one which in fact places Mahayana at odds with about every other transcendental doctrine or religion, which mostly describe emancipation essentially as an individual quest and accomplishment.

What is important to realise in all this is how each soteriological narrative, or each definition of emancipation and final end and purpose, can either challenge or facilitate faith and motivation in the individual practitioner, and that no force exists to guide our motivation to pursue with these emancipatory ends except for our conviction and faith in their reality. How this faith itself in turn develops and comes about is indeed a most astonishing and enigmatic mystery, and it can easily take us back to the very beginning of the story of the human condition. For faith and motivation necessarily require some "story" or narrative that resonates through one's cognitive being; something needs to "make sense" to us at first, in order for our faith and motivation to arise subsequently and pursue a certain corresponding goal with effort and even zeal. Sometimes I do wonder if faith, faith in anything, could be a device of our own imagination and nothing more beyond that, and such, indeed, faith may well be all that it is. But we still do find ourselves alive; we find ourselves *here*, and unable to know with any certainty, independently from any faith, why we are here!

The Buddha addressed this dilemma too, and he compassionately instructed those whose intelligent minds gave rise to conceptual scepticism, to observe and evaluate the direct and immediate impact of their faith and its corresponding practice in their experience, and simply compare how was their mental condition before that, and what has become of it right now, and where it would be leading into the future should one sustain one's faith and practice. Bringing the attention and the evaluative cognitive capacities of the mind to such self-evident and undeniable transformation of psyche across the past and the present renders faith more *deductive* than imaginative, that is, practice appears just like the course of a train that runs over rails, and which we believe without any doubt that, should it keep moving in its same direction, and should nothing appear in its course to obstruct it, then it is bound to reach its terminus. And truly, so long one sees the reality of such demonstrable progress toward a destination without doubt, and so long one

is contented and satisfied in such progress, then it no longer really matters what this destination is or what it consists of!

It has been said somewhere that nibbāna is its own reason! And that it is in the nature of truly transcendental phenomena to defy rationalisation, and further, that the pursuit of it is driven by a kind of motivation that differs qualitatively from that which is supported by a conceptualised faith or purpose. Rather, as the experience toward nibbāna brings its own immediate rewards, it just as well offers its own justification. In a certain sense, and in the context of the vacuum or conundrum of meaning brought about by awakening to the fullest reality of *anatta*, one could learn what is it that still gave meaning and aroused motivation in the pursuit of nibbāna only through discovering it in experience rather than imagining it through thinking. This vacuum of meaning, faith, and motivation, at that junction of the fuller realisation of *anatta*, is then an experience that is to be to some extent *suffered and endured!* It may push against the psyche quite forcefully, yet the answer issues from this very tension and curious restlessness of the conditioned heart. The reality of "nobility", *becoming ennobled*, in a very unique and transcendental sense of this expression, appears then at this junction as the hallmark of one's progress and process of mind-transformation, and it seems to be the very natural response to the crisis of meaning.

Anecdote!

It is understandable that in order for one to come to believe that a certain heavenly destination exists in a certain location somewhere beyond dangerous jungles, turbulent oceans, and high mountain passes, you might need to afford him at first with at least a sketchy map which reveals the way. If he thereafter develops faith and determination to go through with the plan, it is likely that while he's coping with the tigers of the jungles, tides of the oceans, and storms of the mountains, that he will every now and then deeply contemplate whether the heaven that lays beyond all these hardships indeed exists, and indulges to a degree or another in imagining what kind of bliss there to be found in it. It is customary for any human pursuing an important goal to do just that, fixating on the benefits and rewards to which his present toil will deliver him, and the thought of which makes less of the heaviness of his on-going effort, and without which he may well lose faith, either in the existence of the heaven or in his capacity to reach it. It is in this context that we find ourselves inclined to ponder the destination as we make our difficult way to it.

But if in the course of the journey you were to come across another traveller, and if he was to tell you that he, too, is headed toward salvation, though, one which differs in this or that way from yours, and then meet yet another, and another, and many more travellers going about in this direction and that, all headed toward their respective unique salvations; there will necessarily arise in your heart a doubt, a hesitation, and a fatigue of mind as the debilitating thinking unfolds: Is there a God or not? Is there heaven and hell or not? Is there rebirth or not? Is the consciousness originally free or does it become free? Is the unconditioned consciousness one's essential self or is it not? And does it go into Nirvana alone or does it aspire to bring all sentient beings there first? One finds oneself standing at a junction of myriad trails, each going in a different direction, and the real question at this point is, to what extent do these concerns about the ultimate, along with any conceived answers, should influence one's compass across the great journey?

The thing which I most value about Buddhism is that it offers a way out of this critical situation, and from the beginning, it saves one from even coming across this dangerous junction in the middle of the journey; it knows

a bypass! The reason the Buddha emphasises the basics of the beginning of the path is obviously not that ultimate transcendental finalities don't exist, or that they couldn't be understood by those who followed him, but rather because it is by starting from the right point, that the final ultimate end will be surely reached. For it is at the edges of the great village of Nature that the trailheads multiply, some leading toward the mountains, others into the forest, and yet others circle back into the village! And it is here that one's destiny will be decided. Whatever that you will meet, whatever that you will encounter, will depend on which trail you embark upon.

The Buddha does not give a description of the "human condition" in the village of Nature beyond what corresponds strictly to the intrinsic, basic, fundamental aspects of that condition; nor point thither at the peak of deliverance, up and beyond, without having reached it himself at first. Neither the human condition nor the deliverance therefrom are things which belong to the Buddha, and the peak which the Buddha had reached with nothing other than his earthly, humanly existence, has always been there, and still is, and so is the possibility of reaching it by other earthly humans. The unique thing about the Buddha is that he was the first to come back down, to our station in the valley, and in his way back to us, he removed the thick bushes and luses that had grown on the untrodden path, and made such marks on its subtle and hidden features, so as to make it visible and recognisable to others. And what have we now? We can only see where we stand on that path, and we can discern the direction in which it is headed, but we are yet to see the peak, as it remains ever veiled behind the mist; and just as seeing the path requires one to traverse it, seeing the peak requires one to sufficiently approach it.

"Come with me!" the Buddha once said to a certain Nanda, "This trail will bring you to a celestial maiden that is far more bewitching than your earthly fiancé!" Now *convinced* of the worth of the venture, off Nanda goes following the path of the Buddha! And where is the maiden? "Keep walking the path, and walk it properly, and she shall soon be all yours!" And so does Nanda, turning his faculties inwards, he practises that which leads to transcendence even though he is driven by lust! Not asking questions about the reality of transcendence and the nature of the ultimate, not concerned by anything other than the heavenly maiden his prize – he puts his best effort and practises self-awareness with zeal, and soon, instead of meeting with

what his heart desires, he finally sees the path across of which the Buddha has been leading him all along:

Desert all around, and icy mountain peaks; a desolate domain over which not even birds fly, with nothing to offer to any yearning heart. It is a path of the deepest renunciation and farthest seclusion; a path upon which Nanda has by now already trodden many a step, and in the walking through which his bare feet have grown versed. And will he now resent the bluff and go back? Too late! Not even a pose will he take; for as the lustful zeal which used to mobilise his heart, with a body that sweats and a tongue that reaches out of the mouth to breathe more air under the scorching sun, has finally come to cease, drawn out like a dart and thrown to the side; Nanda came to the realisation that no further reason, no cause, no condition is required to set him up against going back, nor motivate him to go on further. There shall be no more sweating and snorting for air; for it is not only the Path that has been revealed, but also, its blissful, meaning-giving, nobility-bestowing rewards. That's why it was not a bluff, but first-hand certainty of the force of the way and of the inescapable efficacy of faring across it. By now, even the Buddha has disappeared from the path, and his eternal abode cannot be discerned. But the path to the Buddha's abode is sufficiently clear; it is *right here*. The clouds make beautiful of the blue which envelops them, the sun is gentle and the soft fragrance of wild flowers is floating about with the breeze so pleasant. And Nanda; Nanda is no longer *really* there, to drink and quench any deep thirst, from the pot which retains a good portion of the cool stream of the very path!

The path begets its own rewards, says the Buddha, and should you take that path, you will find that it indeed does. But one does not take the Buddhist path by thinking about or evaluating its destination; one takes it by practising it and evaluating the outcomes of that very practice. It is this that matters, experientially, practically, pragmatically; it is this that tightly and continuously connects the very first humble beginnings with the final ultimate grand end. Such is the path that begets its own reward, and such is the practice which leads one toward the ultimate transcendental destination.

I am interested in this path. I am interested in this practice; whatever its final destination finally turns out to be!

3.5 Buddhist Nobility: Why 'Suffering'?

"Lord, either let me suffer or let me die."

– Teresa of Ávila

"The scorn of pleasure is the greatest pleasure."

– Diogenes

"Strange to me are all my impulses. Alien to me is all my suffering." – Mahaviveka

"There is conditioning or conditionality; desire is its discernable origin; it can be stopped; and there is a feasible way to stop it". This is perhaps the most principal teaching of the Buddha; the *"ariya-saccā"*, the established translation of which is "Four Noble Truths". But I prefer to use an alternative interpretation, which is just not a pedantic or trivial matter, as it actually sheds much light on this important Buddhist concept: *nobility*.²⁰

There is of course nothing that is intrinsically noble or ignoble in any truth or fact, as such are simply descriptions of independent and objective realities; thus there are no "ignoble truths!" But nobility or ignobility may be comprised in the *effect* which truths may exercise on our consciousness as we engage with them one way or another, or in the *reaction* they elicit from us, specifically, our ability or inclination to admit or recognise them as true or else reject them as false, or to attend to and heed their presumed significance or else ignore them as insignificant, and so forth. A true "Buddhist" is one who not only regards these four statements as true, but

²⁰ There is a persistent tendency in English translations of Pāli compounds, grammatically ambiguous as they usually are, to reflect in the translation the exact word-order of the original Pāli. This literalism had narrowed down the margin of interpretation for many translators; an example of which manifests in their habitual resort to *adjectives* in order to maintain that literal word-order, where no such adjectival use is at all intended in the original. A good example of this is *"anavajja-sukha"*, which is very often translated as "blameless happiness", and which as such could be understood as denoting a genre or kind of happiness that is not blameworthy; a moral or acceptable happiness – where its use in the original clearly intends to refer to something else: rather to the happiness or bliss that comes from the condition of *'being'* unblameable, guilt-free, or free from fault. I believe that the exact same situation applies to the expression *"ariya-sacca"*.

regards also this very *preoccupation* with and understanding of the phenomenon of *dukkha*, the suffering which is inherent in all conditionality and conditioned experience, as a worthwhile, or perhaps the highest preoccupation, and whose mere recognition of and devotion to these truths brings about in him a sense of nobility or, *makes noble*. Hence, these are perhaps "Four *Ennobling* Truths".

Such *ennobling effect* directly manifests in the consequences which come from attending to these truths, rather than just conceptually admitting or believing in them, precisely by applying oneself to "the feasible way to stop conditionality", which, as we have seen, is a gradual path of training and practice that we will examine more closely through the following chapters. Indeed, nothing is more noble than a human consciousness that takes it upon itself to overcome all forms of fear, lust, self-obsession, desire for stimulation, depression, and every last thought and sentiment of resentment and discontent. For these are precisely the manifestations of the conditioned nature of life and existence. We have seen how it is the very definition of life to seek the pleasurable and withdraw from the painful, and how manifold afflictions befall the human being on the basis of this most fundamental somatic and emotional process of life, compounded and augmented in its variety and intensity by human's pervasive imagination. The reason such afflictive psychological dimension of conditionality is so important in most religions, is that it represents precisely the stimulus which forces human to see his own conditionality and dependency, and servitude to the devices of nature. Thus, pain in general is the best experience to function both as a motivator and as a guide through one's journey toward a transcendental emancipation from suffering and all subtler forms of conditionality.

Indeed, as we have seen, the slightest progress in practice brings along with it a greater sense of freedom from the clutches of nature and ego, and though the circumstantial conditions of pain and suffering may still be present, or even intensify, yet the "reactionary self" has become less pronounced, and thereby one's very susceptibility and sensitivity to suffering has decreased *unconditionally*, that is, irrespective of the on-going impact of circumstantial or environmental painful stimuli. Simply, the practitioner now knows that environmental stimuli lack any intrinsic substance or effect, and that that which makes them at all "stimulating" in a pleasurable or painful way, is precisely the psyche's own natural evolutionary functions, and

which he now understands and sees, and in relation to the functioning and emotional impact of which he is continually aware and estranged. This instantly affords the practitioner with a marvellous inward sense of fortitude, stability, and resilience, and self-confidence with regard to his own ability to withstand increasing levels of pain and discomfort, and more profound hardships and difficulties, without a concomitant overwhelming emotional turmoil. This also in turn allows him to see subtler forms of psychological pain along the spectrum of *dukkha* or conditionality, of which he was before that not even aware or able to see or understand, until finally all conditioned experiences, which is all experiences without exception, including joyous and happy ones, become identified as manifestations of *dukkha* or conditionality. Such is the purport of: "What others call happiness, the ennobled call suffering", and "All that manifests is only suffering manifesting. All that ceases is only suffering ceasing".²¹ "Suffering" here is precisely a reference to all conditioned experiences and experiencing.

The bliss that is associated with this experience of Buddhist nobility is not easy to describe, but it may be similar to the feeling of resilience and ability enjoyed by an experienced farmer whose callous hands enable him to handle rough tools for hours on end, or as the numb soles of the feet of a wandering mendicant allow him to move about freely and confidently barefoot through the forest – in a similar way becomes one's confidence and skilfulness in the face of increasing levels of psychological hardships and trials, while at the same time the stimulating impact of gross pleasurable experiences diminishes and fades, leaving in its space a state of mental serenity, calm, and repose, and a very unique kind of renunciate pleasure that was the ultimate joy and bliss of Diogenes the great father of Cynicism, and which is likewise the pleasant abiding and immediate reward of the Buddhist Path to any sincere renunciate practitioner. Buddhist nobility is thus found in the transcendence of the fight-or-flight program; neither escaping nor growing aversive or aggressive with regard to the sources of pain, while at the same time developing a sense of withdrawal and abstinence with regard to the sources of pleasure. And beyond being thus

²¹ "Yaṇ pare sukhato āhu, tadariyā āhu dukkhato" *Paṭhamarūpārāma-sutta* (SN 35.136). "Dukkameva uppajjamānaṇ uppajjati, dukkhaṇ nirujjhamānaṇ nirujjhati" *Kaccānagotta-sutta* (SN 12.15).

resilient in the face of suffering, and indeed in a manner which again takes us back to the ancient Greek celebration and reverence of 'heroism' – the practitioner further develops even curiosity and interest with regard to suffering, depends precisely on his inward afflictive responses, or painful sentiments, in order to learn what forces still operate in his psyche to which he needs to pay closer attention and develop further understanding; this is precisely the course which will lead to the final transcendence of such afflictive responses. Suffering is thus the most essential means by which human can make sense of his conditioned reality, and make sense also of why and how it offers the chance for him to find his ultimate and true purpose, meaning, and value of life. Such essential significance of suffering and conditionality as the event of nature that opens the transcendental gate of light for us to see the truth about ourselves, can be readily seen in what happens when we are denied that very experience of suffering:

In Buddhist cosmology there are many stories about certain types of angelic beings which live dependent on a very fine physical form, or are entirely formless, and which experience of life is devoid of any substantial pain, or of any pain at all. Because of this state of contented and peaceful existence, these angelic creatures which are called *devas*, are said to abide in a state of continual blissful intoxication and are incapable of experiencing the kind of restlessness and turmoil that drives, and even compels human to pose questions about "the human condition", and to wonder about what possible higher purpose exists for his otherwise animalistic conditioned existence. And with the absence of that dimension of dukkha, that is, the physical and psychological pain, these angelic creatures are therefore unable to discern the subtler, existentialist dimension of dukkha that is conditioned existence. Without these bodily and emotional bursts and episodes of pain that we repeatedly experience ever since the very first breath we take at birth, we couldn't possibly appreciate the profundity and significance of the subtlest and ultimate form of suffering: conditioned being.

The trouble is that these angelic creatures, though have gone beyond somatic and emotional pain, yet have not gone beyond precisely that subtle form of suffering: conditionality, and as such, like everything else in existence, they eventually grow old and die, and their consciousness thrusts itself forward passing the karma that is buried in it to a further life. Sooner or later the qualities of such consciousness and its karma deteriorate, and

the lives in which it manifests and by which it propels itself forward in existence become grosser and grosser, not only increasingly physical, but psychologically, increasingly brute-like. The consciousness passes through a human life and down further into an animal life, until finally the once angelic consciousness manifests in the lower realms, in which the most miserable forms of life flourish, or rather suffer, since these lower realms represent precisely the exact opposite of the angelic ones. There, also, no chance exists for these now daemonic cursed creatures to make sense of their suffering or find a moment of repose or clarity with which to contemplate it, in that, unlike the angelic realms, they are continually overwhelmed by suffering and, like animals, don't even possess the necessary mental qualities with which to comprehend it. And on goes the consciousness in this cyclic up and down across the various stratified realms without purpose or end.

No one but human, then, can amount to such "nobility of mind" with which to become intrigued by and curious about suffering, and to make sense of it in such a way as to enable him to discover the most ultimate and sublime possible purpose, meaning, and value of life, which is precisely the overcoming of such suffering. We have seen how palpitation or chest pain is all that it takes in order for one to become immediately and vividly aware of his otherwise unconscious heart beating or breathing; dukkha for a true Buddhist practitioner is the pain that brings awareness to his otherwise unconscious conditioned existence, and as such, pain and suffering are in a certain sense the necessary vice that at all makes ultimate bliss knowable and accessible, and without which there can be no salvation. Staring directly at pain, and taking full responsibility for it as an inward experience that can be transcended, and that no other force can transcend except through one's own faith, motivation, and attention; that is what Buddhist nobility is.

What is learnt from this remarkable cosmological narrative is that, should human be either given to oppose and antagonise every form of suffering as to avoid or destroy it, or otherwise be exposed to overwhelming doses of it, in either case, the chances for the mind to arise to a state of nobility diminish proportionately. And indeed we do find the reflection of this colourful cosmological narrative in the real life of humans, manifesting most vividly perhaps in the condition of the rare genetic disorder *congenital insensibility to pain*, which nullifies the fundamental sensation of pain in the perception of the patient and thereby renders him clueless about what is

harmful and never able to understand and learn what to avoid in nature, resulting finally in a life that is, though free from any moment of pain, yet is characterised by continual physical malfunctioning, disease, injury, and finally premature death. On the other hand we find rather a wide prevalence of multiple forms of crippling mental illnesses which, whether caused by genetic disorders or acquired in traumatic life-events, result in a psyche characterised mostly by continual surrender to suffering, hopelessness, self-worthlessness, and finally suicide.

This Buddhist definition of nobility represents the alternative to meaninglessness, and it is inextricably intertwined with the Buddhist transcendental world-view and no-self-view! And further than that, it contends that such nobility is the only conceivable meaning of human life that can ever be *experientially* found. Whether or not one pursues nibbāna or any other form of transcendental emancipation, what the realisation of transcendental nobility requires is this immediate and present sense of resilience, responsibility, and openness in the face of pain and suffering. Such *spiritual* stance brings about a condition of union between the earthly and the transcendental in the experience of the individual, and it is precisely such condition that prevents one from falling victim to nihilistic, fatalistic, or hedonistic views, which are themselves nothing more than cognitive edifices constructed by a reactionary ego. Thereby the ennobled human finally secures his ascendancy beyond life and death, and every other form of conditioned being and existence.

4. The Evolutionary Origin of 'Mind'

(On Nāmarūpa, Pancupādānakhandā, and the Satipatthānā)

"We arrive, accordingly, at the following conclusion: attention depends upon emotional states; emotional states are reducible to tendencies; tendencies are fundamentally movements (or arrested movements) and may be conscious or unconscious. Attention, both spontaneous and voluntary, is accordingly, from its origin on, bound up in motor conditions." –Théodule Ribot (1898).

4.1 Motricity and the Birth of Emotional Memory

The entire story of the evolution of motivation and effort has its genesis in one of the most basic and simple, and usually overlooked phenomena of life: *motion*, and that is so because other more complex and fundamental mental functions, such as attention, emotion, memory, and finally thinking, have themselves evolved in close connection with and on the basis of the evolution of motor capacities, and are inseparable from it.

We can immediately see in the behaviour of bacteria and plants how they *react through motion* to harmful and nourishing tactile contacts. The plant instantly *knows* that an environmental object is dangerous through an intrinsic capacity to recognise its harmful biochemical or physiological impact on its body, and likewise it is endowed with a natural intrinsic capacity to "*remember*" the tactile features of that object and associate them with its harmful impact, and that's precisely how it *learns to develop* defence mechanisms with regard to that particular object in the course of its repeated contact with it. Simple organisms are thus capable of three things: knowing that the object is harmful, being able to remember the sensorial tactile features of the object, and developing what it takes to fend against it – all of which happens deterministically merely through repetition of contact.

The exact same process unfolds with more complex animals, which are likewise intrinsically capable of distinguishing painful and pleasurable contacts. But unlike plants and bacteria, whose subsequent reactionary behaviours are entirely autonomic, immediate effects of tactile contact and of

which they haven't the slightest awareness or control; mammals experience "emotion" between sensorial contact and the subsequent response (*phassa* → *vedanā* → *tanhā/upādāna*), and the association of those emotions with the sensorial features of the various objects which cause them in us is what makes us *remember emotionally* (*saññā*). This emotional memory is the foundation of mammalian learning, and a repeated pleasure or pain produces in the memory an object that is loved or hated.

This distinction between simple and complex organisms is obviously because emotions are of no evolutionary utility to such basic forms of life. It is evident that the development of the senses, emotion, and memory, followed closely along with the development of motor capacities. Unlike such simple organisms which have no motor skills and which float about or stand rooted in their environments, a more complex organism with motor capacities can move toward or away from what's useful or harmful, and could do so even before it comes in direct touch with it, if it was endowed with the appropriate senses with which to detect it from a distance (smell or hear or see it). But in order for an organism to *learn* whether a certain environmental object is useful or harmful, it needs to come in direct touch with it at least once, only after that will it be able to *remember* not only whether the object is pleasurable or painful, but also the tactile, gustatorial, olfactory, auditory, and visual features of the object, so that when it encounters it a second time in the environment, it succeeds in identifying it from a distance and recovers its experience with it from memory and behaves toward it accordingly. Thus it is *saññā*, the sum and amalgam of experiences marked and sorted by emotional and memory capacities, that enables a herbivore, for example, to learn that the mangrove leaf is harmful, and to never approach it again, and without which it would not be able to benefit from its motor capacities by avoiding what's harmful and pursuing what's useful, simply because it will need to re-experience what's harmful and useful each time it comes across them in the environment, and never retains its experience in memory; which is precisely what happens in mammals whose hippocampus is removed, and whose behaviour becomes as a result excessively and continually exploratory as the environment manifest to them as a perpetually new one of perpetually unknown details.

We thus find in the single phenomenon of autonomic movement of bacteria or tropism of plants, the foundation of what will later manifest

distinctly in complex organisms as selective attention, emotional reactionariness, and emotional memory. Though this fundamental layer of autonomic reactionariness continues to exist in complex animals, manifesting in the various autonomic bodily reflexes which we experience upon contact with harmful objects, yet attention, emotion, and memory begun to manifest as salient mental phenomena that are separate from motricity and are no longer comprised in it. In the emotion of fear for example, though the release of adrenalin and the spontaneous reflexes of the body continue to unfold concomitantly in close connection to one another, yet they have become now also distinct phenomena that could function independently from one another. This is so because each one of these phenomena may in the case of more complex animals, function in a useful manner each on its own, and fear, adrenalin, and autonomic movement, become each potentially useful independently from each other in a variety of situations. Further, the variety of emotions function as *situation-specific* variables of conditioning and learning by punishment and reward, so that "*pain*" experienced after swimming in a very cold sea teaches one to avoid very cold water but not temperate ones, while "*fear*" of sharks or of drowning on the other hand teaches one to categorically avoid all dangerous waters even if they were temperate.

This tight connection between motricity, sensorial attention, and emotion, never entirely broke apart, and autonomic reflexes to the sight of a snake or to the touch of a flame represent only the most extreme and vivid manifestation of this fundamental animal organic connection between these capacities and faculties. Further more subtle manifestations of this connection can be readily found in body language and facial expressions, most of which are universal to every species, except in the case of human where, perhaps only to a limited extent, they may be culturally conditioned. Many observers have mostly regarded body and facial motricity as a means of "self-expression" and "communication", as if they were phenomena that are attached to attention and emotion and are subsequent to them. There is no real evidence that this is the case, and it has been suggested by various psychologists, including most notably the contemporaneous pioneers William James and Théodule Ribot, that one cannot separate an attentional or emotional experience from its motor (physiological) manifestations.

These observations are highly relevant to the understanding of the Buddhist practice of *Kāyagatāsati* or awareness of bodily conditions as a practice that goes far beyond the mere exercise of an orderly and collected attention in the recognition of body movements and postures as is sometimes understood. It is indeed the case that everything the body does, and every state it takes, is directly telling us something about the mind, and vice versa, every mental event, however much subtle it may be, manifests necessarily one way or another in the body. The practice of observing and discerning the *meaning* and *mental purport* of the many various bodily conditions and functions is one of the most powerful in all Buddhist practice, in that it offers a straightforward and systematic method of *finding out* about the mind and about its spontaneous activity through the direct observation of one's own body, just as if bodily functions were a perfect map of the mind, and one that is capable of revealing every single mental event, along with the change and transformation thereof, as it occurs in real time. Practitioners who are endowed with such temperament as characterised by a higher level of estrangement and dispassion with regard to their own bodies and its hedonic impulses, are known to make very rapid progress through this practice.

4.2 Cognition

Thus, one layer forms on top of the other, starting from motion, to the multiplicity of the senses, to selective attention, to emotion and memory, until we finally arrive at the imagination, by means of which the animal manages to learn by "*categorisation*" and becomes able, for example, to consume a ripe fruit under a tree but avoid a rotten one next to it, or devour another dead animal today but leave it behind tomorrow when its body will have become decomposed.

Then comes the cognitive capacity for "*sympathy*", the evolutionary utility of which enables an animal to learn that an object is painful even just by witnessing its harmful impact on *another* animal, or by watching other animals react to it as a source of pain, and ends up avoiding these objects itself even though it has never experienced their impact directly by itself. The evolutionary advantage of such sympathetic learning is self-evident, especially in the case of contact with dangerous objects which lead to fatal illness or death and leaves the animal with no chance of recovery. But as is often the case with imagination, there is a downside to this advantage: it can give rise in the psyche of the animal to a kind of *prejudice* as compels it to avoid objects which it did not experience itself, and which could be in fact neutral or even useful to it. Fear of water is one such widespread prejudice among mammals, and which is justified by the potential danger of hidden predators beneath the water surface. But toddlers, watching the extreme caution of adults as they approach the water, become afraid of the water itself! The same pervades human life, and it is not surprising to find a certain irrational phobia overtaking an entire family. So effective is the power of such sympathetic learning to the extent that it is precisely what is being exploited by systems of social order and behavioural regulation, and is what makes the "punishment" of one wrongdoer at all effective in restraining another from repeating the same wrongdoing.

Next comes "*generalisation*", the crux of imagination, and which is tightly connected with emotional memory, whereby the mammal learns that "all lions" are dangerous, "all trees" provide shade, "all autumns" are followed by winters, and "all winters" are cold, etc. This allows the mammal to maximise its avoidance of pain and exposure to pleasure by being more ready and anticipating to what's coming, including the standard, expected

behaviour of other species, allowing the animal to know in advance how to interact with and use the particulars of environment. Without generalisation, a deer would never be able to learn that the male lion which it is encountering now, is as much dangerous as the female lion that had chased it yesterday, simply because the two lions look slightly different! But again, the downside to this evolutionary advantage is yet another kind of prejudice, "over-generalisation", whereby an inexperienced animal may act as if "all four-legged animals" are dangerous, and thereby live in continual fear and anxiety, unable to coexist with non-harmful animals, thus depriving itself from a fuller access to natural resources. Such over-generalisations which are often formed in a young age, become gradually *refined* as the mammal grows older and as it expands its repertoire of appropriate reactions by acquiring them in the course of time from other more experienced members of its social group. And again this same prejudice is everywhere to be found in human life, which, due to its distance from nature, often deprives individuals and groups from the chance of refining their over-generalisations, which is a necessary process for *maturing*, and the absence of which leads to many forms of excessive views, confusion, alienation, separation and conflict, most notably in the forms of racism and sexism and so forth.

Finally, the preceding reveals further the kind of interplay which unfolds between emotional and cognitive functions, and which we have already touched upon in our review of self-stimulation and depression. Though many of our cognitive evaluations regarding world and self come directly from the emotional outcomes of our experiences, yet, either necessity or chance, or in the case of human, also investigation and contemplation, can prove our emotional conclusions and views wrong and lead us to correct them, which consequently results in the transformation of emotional responses. This is the process through which toddler mammals eventually learn to shift their fear from water itself to the possible predator that lurks underneath its surface. This points to the vital significance of the cognition as a highly effective factor of mental health, which is a fundamental principle in Buddhist psychology, and which is perhaps reinforced by the present remarkable success of *cognitive-behavioural therapy* in the west.

Ancient Indian psychologists took great interest in the observation of how all fear ceases the moment one realises that what one saw as a snake on

the ground turned out to be a fallen tree branch; to them this was a clear evidence that emotion is conditioned ultimately by view; by how objects are being *perceived*. What this meant was indeed no less than that every emotional compulsion can be *overturned* through cognitive manipulation or the transformation of view, and even when the object is in fact a snake, or even the advent of a horrific angel of death! Such cognitive manipulation is precisely the mechanism which allows for any renunciation and abstinence with regard to the profound enticements and threats of nature. But none of this means that "Darwin was wrong", or that emotions are "cognitively constructed" independently from evolutionary foundations.²² It is only that, as we have seen, the *gradual* development of a higher-order cognitive stratum at a further point in the history of life increased the reach of those very cognitive capacities in the regulation of emotional responses, either by augmentation and sensationalisation, or neutralisation and even cessation. This does not mean that cognitive capacities took over the process of emotional formations and responses, but only that they became a significant factor in their transformation and regulation. And though it is true that a person with a damaged amygdala may still report experiences involving fear, this be the case predominantly due to the fact that he has already experienced fear before his brain injury, and that such experience is retained in his emotional memory and is precisely the thing which he reports after the injury, rather than, properly speaking, a new and fresh emotional experience of fear. Remove the amygdala at birth, and no fear will ever be reported, because none will be experienced, just as a patient with congenital insensitivity to pain never knows what physical pain is as an experience and therefore never report any such pain. Thus, no emotion can possibly originate from cognitive functions alone, and further, such emotional experiences that are characterised by an excessive cognitive stimulation, tend strongly toward abnormality and psychosis.

²² For a review of such perspectives see for example the work of Professor Lisa Barrett: *Are Emotions Natural Kinds?* Association for Psychological Science. 2006 Mar; 1(1):28-58. *The theory of constructed emotion: an active inference account of interoception and categorization*. Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience. 2017 Jan; 12(1): 1–23.

4.3 Thought and Thinking

When we speak of "*knowing, willing, and intending*", what we experientially mean to refer to is "thought" or "thinking", and these were observed by ancient Indian meditators to be conditioned, which allowed them to see no independent functionality in them. Unlike René Descartes, instead of saying "**I** think", the Buddha would have said: "*there is thought*". Descartes' fallacy appears clearly in how the statement "I think" already presupposes the existence of the "I", which Descartes later uses to prove the existence of self: "therefore I am"! As such it did no longer matter whether one thinks or does otherwise, and it is equally arguable then to say, I sleep, I eat, or I defecate, therefore I am! But the reason Descartes picked thought and thinking to identify with selfhood was because it was what he found to exist still apart from the functioning of the five senses. He did not investigate thought further and simply *believed* that it was the essence of the human being. At last, and since it was precisely such Cartesian philosophy that came to dominate and lay the foundations of western philosophy and science ever since "*cogito ergo sum*", the notion that human's cognitive capacities, particularly thinking and judgement or evaluation, represent his self and afford him with agency and freewill, became a fundamental axiom on the basis of which all inquiries into the human condition were founded. As such, this apparently high mark of philosophical achievement in western history, from a Buddhist point of view, only came from Oblivion and did nothing other than the reinforcement and propagation of Oblivion!

Interestingly, both ancient Indian meditators and Descartes regarded the mind as a field of observation and experimentation, but only, Descartes couldn't envisage the very possibility that thought and thinking can be *stopped*! Had he done so, like the ancient Indian meditators did, and had he learnt the meditative exercise with which to experience the cessation of thinking, there would be no way for him to regard it so highly ever after! As mentioned earlier, when the meditator experiences the cessation of a certain mental experience, only then does he really learn about its transcendence. What Descartes did was to observe and examine the mind from within the realm of thought and by means of it, and therefor he came to the conclusion that thought was itself the ultimate faculty of the mind and the core of human's existence. The Buddha on the other hand, and many meditators

before him, learnt by experience that thought was merely a spontaneous mental process that unfolded according to certain natural laws and conditions which they could directly observe, and the impact of which they were able to witness manifesting in the qualities and functioning of thought and thinking, and which they learned how to control and manipulate even up to the point of the cessation of thought and thinking in a meditative context. Thus, the stream of thought was found to function in an essentially similar manner as the other senses, and therefore became regarded as yet a *sixth sense*.

This constant and ceaseless ideational stream, which is sometime conscious but predominantly subliminal, functions as a highly significant factor in the formation of spontaneous and unconscious motivations, and at the same time afford us with knowledge and access to the very existence and nature of those motivations as we manage to become conscious of our spontaneous thoughts. As such a *properly conditioned* and purposefully directed thought and thinking, as we shall soon see, is essential for the alignment of one's motivations with one's conscious goals. Yet this does not make thinking a mental process that we can directly control or wield independently or at will, as is widely believed; for if that was possible, then there would indeed be a freewill and agency, and then everyone would be able to attain whatever state of excellence they desire! In a certain sense, the proof that no freewill exists comes to us readily from the fact that we cannot control our thoughts, not even for a few moments, and one of the earliest lessons in meditation is simply to observe that very lack of control, and to appreciate its meaning:

Pick any object you like, a "chair" for example, and make the resolution to think about it as an abstract mental construct, in which ever way you like, through visual or auditory memory, or both, and see if you can keep your thought focused on it without interruption for half an hour. And since you will surely fail, then try again for a lesser time: ten minutes, five minutes, two minutes, half a minute, and see the result. Even for a few seconds, most people cannot sustain the thought on the object! Now, and since you have found out about such embarrassingly unruly nature of your own thought, try to let your mind wander freely as it pleases then, without the slightest effort to control, restrain, or manipulate its functioning or its ideational contents in any way, except, that the thought of "chair", or of the object that you have

chosen, must not arise in it even a single time. And since, again, you will surely fail, then try to restrain the thought of the object from arising more than two times, ten times, or any greater number of times as you keep trying. Even for eternity, no one is ever able to wilfully restrain the occurrence of any object in the mind-stream, and in most cases it persists in the background of every other thought, as the experimenter attempts to distract his thought away from the prohibited object by directing it to another object.

Such is the utterly conditioned nature and functioning of this mental process that we call thought and thinking, and these simple observations and truths are indeed all that it takes to explain how we couldn't possibly regard thought and thinking as something that is emanating from any independent and free will, and why we persistently fail to pursue with such tasks the accomplishment of which is something that we ourselves immensely desire. Nevertheless, having recognised such stream of thought which conditions our motivations, decisions, determinations and actions, itself as a conditioned mental phenomenon, it becomes necessary to discover those natural mental forces which condition it in turn, if we were to succeed in regulating it in such a way as to align its impact with our transcendental motivations. This lends us directly to 'memory', one of the most important mental functions in Buddhist psychology and philosophy of mind.

4.4 Memory

"Memory, the warder of the brain."

– William Shakespeare

Next in the variety of mental faculties that give the impression of selfhood is memory, and the concept of the *"identity of consciousness"* which the Buddha strongly denied, must have appeared as a self-evident truth to anyone who ever witnessed a case of rebirth, where a child accurately recalls and narrates the events of a known and identified past life. That the person that was narrating the events of a past life was not identical to that which lived the past life, gave the impression that it was the same consciousness that inhabited both persons, since otherwise the memory itself of the past life would not be possible without an identical consciousness. This is very much similar to Descartes' fallacy, as the supposition that consciousness is a stable entity or a thing, is used to prove that it is the same consciousness that witnesses an experience in one life and then recalls it later in another. The Buddha however experienced the consciousness rather as a *fluid, non-fixed process (a-paṭiṭṭhā)* that is undergoing constant transformation, to the extent that not even in the one lifetime, or even in a tiny lapse of it, can consciousness be regarded as identical.²³

And just as the Buddha would declare: "there is thought" without attributing the thought to any selfhood or identical consciousness, likewise he would declare: "there are memories" without attributing them to any entity. Memories too arise through one's mental existence according to natural laws and conditions, which also exercise great influence on motivation and effort. We have already examined *saññā* or emotional memory, which humans share with mammals. But in connection with thought, or very much what constitutes thought itself, is another more

²³ "Some understand how a person's stream of consciousness, though uninterrupted across and through, yet is *non-identical*, neither in this existence nor in the other. This, is the highest discernment." "Purissassa ca viññāṇasotaṃ pajānāti, ubhayato abbocchinnaṃ idha loke *appaṭiṭṭhitaṇca* paraloke *appaṭiṭṭhitaṇca*. [...] Etadānuttariyaṃ, bhante, dassanasamāpattisū." *Sampasādanīya-sutta* (DN 28). See also *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya-sutta* (MN 38).

sophisticated type of memory which is sometimes referred to as declarative or explicit memory. It is that which provides context and narrative, which connects the dots of more subtle causes and more distant effects, and which is needed for such complex tasks as deduction and inference. It is this type of memory that allows us, unlike animals, to remember past events as "episodes" rather than as separate incidents without a context; and it is precisely what enables one to remember an event of a past life and infer from that memory that it was his life too, or a life that his consciousness experienced.

This type of memory, which is exclusively human, is a fundamental natural conditioner of motivation. However since it also functions spontaneously and arises in the mind-stream on its own accord, and since therefore we cannot remember anything *intentionally*, but only through another mental stimulus – yet learning how to align our thoughts to meet our goals is based on nothing other than observing what happens before and after a memory arises, and what are such stimuli which contribute to its functioning, in order to learn how to influence our memories in such a way as to present more frequently in the mind-stream the objects most suitable for the support and reinforcement of unnatural motivations, such as those of abstinence, dispassion, and renunciation, and which nature and the ego punishes or attempts to suppress through pain and depression. We shall discuss this important process further in the course of our examination of "self-awareness" and "effort".

The first observation that motor and verbal behaviour arise spontaneously from emotional memory, and the second observation that declarative memory plays a significant role in the formation of cognitive constructs pertaining to world-view and self-view, together make motivation fundamentally a special form of *remembering*; a remembering that begets a certain action which corresponds to a certain specific goal or desire. For example, if we return to the toddler mammals that "learned" to fear water itself by observing the caution of adults as they approach it; we will find such learning manifesting itself in their ability to become stimulated or motivated to avoid water *each time* they encounter it. Motivation here is precisely the arousal in the mind-stream of an emotional memory about the water, while the action, the mobilisation of muscles and vocalisations of fear, happen spontaneously afterwards and based solely on such arousal of emotional

memory. By the time the toddlers learn to shift their fear from water to the predators which lurk in it, this learning in turn becomes now comprised in their ability to erase or modify an emotional memory about water, and arouse a new emotional memory about predators, which in turn conditions and begets a transformation of stimulation or motivation with regard to contact with water, finally allowing the toddlers to contextualise and approach water in the same *wise* fashion as adults do.

It is precisely such elastic and transformable states of motivation that give the strongest impression of agency and freewill, and therefore we can say in a figurative sense that, being the operational foundation of all possible recognition and motivation; memory, is the soul of the living being! Théodule Ribot, referring to it as "*l'attention spontanée*", summarises this truth about memory quite beautifully:

"As pleasure and pain are only signs that certain of our tendencies are being satisfied or crossed; and as our tendencies are what is deepest in us; as they express the very depths of our personality, of our character; it follows that spontaneous attention has its roots in the very basis of our being. The nature of spontaneous attention in any person reveals his character, or, at least, his fundamental tendencies. It tells us, whether a person is frivolous, vulgar, narrow, open, or deep. The janitor's wife will spontaneously lend her whole attention to the gossip of her neighbors; the painter to a beautiful sunset, in which the peasant only sees the approach of night; the geologist to the stones he chances to find, in which the uninitiated only see worthless pebbles. Let the reader look into himself and around him; the examples are so easily found, that it is useless to dwell longer upon them."²⁴

What every creature sees in itself and in the environment corresponds tightly to what *pops-up* in its memory and mind-stream as important, valuable, meaningful, or urgent – and the right practice of emancipatory effort and of Buddhist nobility is concerned with rendering important, valuable, and urgent, the transcendental understanding and attitude with regard to all reality and experience, while at the same time rendering unimportant, valueless, and useless, normal and natural understandings and attitudes with regard to them. The reason this task is difficult is that that which causes certain memories to pop up more frequently and to be sustained on a certain mental object more continuously, is that such object is

²⁴ *Psychologie de L'attention* (1889). Translation by: The Open Court Publishing Company. 1903.

capable of inducing a higher level of stimulation than other objects; that is, we naturally and spontaneously tend to remember more frequently and think more continuously of such phenomena as give rise to a higher level of self-stimulation through either pleasure or pain; this is part and parcel of the mechanism which makes fear and lust so effective and pervasive, that is, it is the mental objects associated with fear and lust, rather than renunciation and dispassion, that are remembered more frequently and thought of more continuously. We shall see in the following chapter how this process of the transformation of view and of the nature of memory unfolds.

Conclusion

Such are the conditions which govern human thinking and memory, out of which motivation and effort conditionally and spontaneously arise, and such is their genesis and evolutionary history. It is for such close ancient connection between motricity and the evolutionary development of the mind that the various mental faculties function in the way they do, that is, in a way which is based on motion and serves the survival of the organism through motion; that's why it is impossible to find a creature that can hear and see, and develop emotional evaluations of experience, but yet lives rooted in earth like plants. Such creature doesn't exist because all these sensorial, emotional and cognitive mechanisms with which it is endowed, are useful only in the event it is capable of motion.

Attention itself, which is at the foundation of every other mental process, can be regarded as a process of movement, a process of registering and recognising of change, a process developed for no purpose other than to keep up with the transformation of environmental conditions in real time, and which reports such changes to the awareness and thereby enables the organism to adjust to them moment by moment, precisely, by moving toward or away from objects, or perhaps by remaining calm and staying still should there be nothing in the environment to stimulate. Thus, even in its circumstantial calm and repose, the attention of the living creature is still restless, alert, ready to burst in alarm, either with aversion and fear, or with craving and lust. That's why the attention is so frantic and erratic, inconstant, not made for calm, disinterest, and dispassion, but rather the opposite, movement, action, and life.

This sheds much light on the age-long inquiry regarding the body-mind dualism. It shows that there are no two separable or independent domains of experience, one bodily the other mental; but rather that every mental condition manifests in the body and changes it, and every bodily condition is accompanied by a mental accommodation of it. The one mirrors exactly the condition of the other, nothing is left out! Further, every single atom of matter and process of mind can be accounted for in the evolutionary record; nothing comes from nothing, and every single phenomenon, including the most complex cognitive ones, can be traced back to a more simple point of

origin, and can be regarded as naturally evolved to serve some adaptive function or another.

This realisation is very important as a guide to our understanding of mental afflictions and of how to cure them, and how physiological functions are only *manifestations* of mental functions, and not necessarily or always their causes. Granted that a fractured bone can be regarded as the cause of pain, but such is only a circumstantial truth – what actually happened is that both the bone-fracture and the pain arose together and are caused by, say, a dog bite – and it is only in rare and exceptional situations that painful sensations will be experienced without a concomitant physical cause, or prominent physical conditions will arise without sensations. In other words, in the mere experience of the sensation of pain over a fractured bone caused by a dog bite, there is no inherent or necessary *mental* affliction. Such mental affliction arises only in the subsequent *depression* which comes from being unable to escape the pain, and the subsequent neurotic *fear* of dogs. Surely at this point we can no longer say that the fractured bone is alone, or directly, the cause of these afflictive emotional states, and we have already examined how such depression and fear have evolutionary foundations of their own. But the remarkable thing is that their arousal as mental states is concomitant with the arousal of physiological hormonal functions too, and it is precisely here that we can no longer discern which arousal happens first or later, and which gives rise to the other. And though we may indeed succeed in manipulating or tweaking physiological functions through pharmaceutical and other means in ways which diminish or even erase every trace of depression and fear (say through the suppression of the functioning of the amygdala), we then immediately encounter two major and serious problems:

The first is the far-reaching negative side effects of such manipulation of the body, which in turn manifests not only in further bodily problems, but also in the mind; which is well documented in the use of pharmaceutical substances or surgeries to cure mental conditions, including those caused purely by genetic or physical dysfunction (as in epilepsy or adrenal or thyroid gland-dysfunction). Though such bodily intervention indeed represents one of the most important benevolent contributions of medical science to humanity, yet such practices do not always solve mental problems, but rather exchange them with other mental problems that are perhaps only slightly more tolerable, and the mind thus remains not anywhere near being

in shape! Because the body and the mind are each such complex integrated systems, and because they are further intertwined together in every respect, any such forceful manipulation of one part of any of these systems sparks a wave of transformation elsewhere in the body-mind system, and one of the things which make the work of medical scientists too challenging is precisely the difficulty of isolating the impact of tackling one aspect of the body-mind system in a way which prevents such intervention from spiralling with negative ramifications elsewhere in that holistic system.

This lends us to the second problem: the more we continue to resolve to bodily manipulation to overcome increasingly subtler forms of mental suffering, the more the individual becomes vulnerable and susceptible to further mental suffering and clueless about how to overcome it without physiological manipulation. At this point the pain that he experiences due to subtler forms of mental suffering are equal, or probably even greater, to that which he used to endure at first without any bodily manipulation at all. It is just as in the destructive impact of the frequent use of antibiotics which it exercises on the natural immune system. As such we could only come to the certain conclusion that deliverance from mental suffering through bodily manipulation can be accomplished only by denying the body every experience of life, sentience and feeling – instead of overcoming suffering or transcending it, what we get is the perpetual denial of consciousness itself, that is, death. Again we have indeed solved the problem of circumstantial suffering, but ended up deeply plunged in another problem: *rebirth*. It is for this reason that *Amata*, or the transcendence of death, is a highly relevant idea in Buddhist soteriology, and as we have seen, when suffering is denied, no such transcendence is possible.

At last the vital question appears: If thought, attention, and memory, are beyond our control and are driven solely by natural evolutionary mechanisms, and if willpower cannot be relied on to reach a transcendental goal, and if the manipulation of the body brings but very limited results for the deliverance of the mind – how is it then, that any emancipation is at all possible? And how do we get to develop faith in it in the first place? And what is it that then determines and regulates our motivation and effort in the course of its experiential realisation?

5. 'Awakening' ... of What Exactly?!

(On *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, *Pañña*)

5.1 Gnosis, Faith, and Fate!

It is indeed quite a significant question, how does it come to pass that one person develops understanding and faith in one thing, and another person in another thing, which could be even contrary to what the first believes in? Some see fate or plan in everything that happens, and regard it as cosmologically meaningful that one should come upon a transcendental path in the course of life. Others see what comes to pass as a product of chance and circumstance, and indeed, we can spend for ever trying to trace the present situation or circumstance of our individual lives back to any particular point of origin without arriving at any satisfying result. How is it and why, that one person becomes honourable while another shameful, one trustworthy another a traitor, one honest another a liar, one benevolent another a villain? And to what extent do each of them really "chooses" to become the way they are, and whether it ever makes sense that one should choose to become evil, hurtful, and violent; or is it perhaps that, to expand on Socrates: no one does *anything* knowingly?!

There is hardly any one particular point or event in our past that could have functioned as the sole cause in shaping our present; rather it will be found to be a series of events and experiences, which together elicit or draw forth from our consciousness certain attentional, emotional, and cognitive reactionary inclinations. Such continual interaction and interplay between these two domains, the world of manifestations and our own mental world, continuously create and recreate a flow of oblivious mental habits, the summation of which results in precisely such formed and fashioned things that we customarily call "You" and "I". This is precisely the process through which one person becomes a villain while another a saint, along with all that falls in between.

Why and how the sight of illness, senility, and death, evokes a sense of urgency and purpose in one individual, disgust in another, and nonchalance in a third? It cannot be known for certain; but it is said that these

inclinations of the consciousness do not only come from its experience through the present life, but are also acquired from its experience where ever it was before materialising in this present life-form. And whatever the case may be, what we know for certain is that our inclinations arise *first*, and they do so *spontaneously*, automatically, on their own accord, and that if we should ever become aware of them, approve or reject them, that self-awareness comes only later, much later, if it ever comes! Yet it is precisely this very intrinsic capacity, just the mere capacity and potential of such self-awareness, that establishes our humanness. That is to say, we can be sure that, at least, every human being is endowed with this *capacity* of self-awareness, and can thereby rise above the state of the oblivious animal and to concern himself with the understanding and investigation of his own existential condition; though, of course, we never expect such to be the concern and preoccupation of every human being!

This picture shows us how true faith is always an individualistic experience, not only in how it comes to pass in the first place, but also with regard to its object. We see this very clearly in the development of endless doctrinal sectarianism in nearly every religion, and in how understanding and faith correspond exactly to the uniqueness of the individual consciousness even among those who are following the same religious sect. It is just as two artists who regard as beautiful the sight of sunset, will never appreciate in the scenery exactly the same elements and will never produce the exact same painting of it. This is another domain in which scientific knowledge differs from transcendental knowledge, where the self-same image of sunset, representing exactly the elements of reality without any further filtration or augmentation, is being produced rather by a deaf and dead photographic device which represents the methodical rigour of science; and whether this is telling us something about the limitations of such science in the grasp of things human and psychological, where the understanding of the whole picture of consciousness requires no less than the transcendence of consciousness, rather than relying on it when it is still in a conditioned form.

In whatever way inclination and faith come to arise, we cannot but recognise that uniquely identifiable process, when, having come to learn about the various ideas and facts of life and existence, and whether they be scientific and mundane, or ideational and transcendental – the

consciousness becomes finally either suddenly and wholly overtaken by faith, or becomes gradually saturated by it. Everything that happens by way of motivation and effort in the pursuit of any goal commences right from this very enigmatic inception of faith, and as such, faith is a fundamental factor in the conditioning of memory and of what we come to remember. This perhaps corresponds to the Protestant *Sola fide* idea, that "faith alone" is all that it takes for the deliverance of the believer, not by way of dogma and nothing else as is sometimes understood, but rather given the psychological ramifications of true and profound faith; precisely, its deterministic impact on emotion, thought, attention, and memory.

In the same context may be understood also the great emphasis which many spiritual traditions place on "the power of the spoken word" and on "the miracle of conversion" or "sudden awakening", where it is believed that the proclamation of transcendental truths, or repetition of mantras or certain successions of select words in order, or liquefying and dismantling the conceptual rigidity of mind through the counterintuitive anecdotes and puzzles of the "koan", will in this way or that remove the veil, untie the knot, or unlock the gate which otherwise keep the "Soul" or the "Atman" or the "Knower" or the "Seer" or the "Satori" or the "Buddha Nature" dormant, and thereby keeping the consciousness blind and oblivious to its intrinsic freedom, gnosis, or capacity for perfection. The idea is that the mere hearing of these verbal cues, especially with the consciousness in an altered, highly receptive and intuitive state, which may be induced through a preparatory exercise or ritual, can revivify an already established or intrinsic inclination or faith in the psyche of the listener, and thereby lead him to an immediate awakening, and independently from his normal faculties of evaluative awareness and judgement, and perhaps particularly with their temporal absence. It is noteworthy that, in many of these spiritual traditions, it is believed that this is actually the *only way* through which true faith or deliverance can be accessed, and that however much one may at the beginning of the journey rely on reason or any other form of rational verification of the efficacy and truth of the transcendental teaching, at a certain point progress toward salvation will must necessarily depend on gaining access to the spiritual awakening afforded by these intuitive (or counterintuitive) means and by no other.

This is a further point in which Theravada and Mahayana go in separate ways; but before addressing this matter further, it is important to recognise that it is probably the great majority of spiritual traditions in the world that espouse some version or another of such experience of "Awakening", and that there is reason to believe that the manifold descriptions of it, told by many too many individuals around the world in their various corresponding traditions, and which we find in both documents written in times ancient as well as in the directly audible speech of living practitioners, make much of the reality and significance of these experiences, and make little of the dismissive attitudes which regard them as fiction or superstition. But we will also keep in mind that these traditions, and even sects within the same tradition, can and do disagree among themselves regarding various variables associated with the reality, extent, and perfection of this experience of Awakening, and most certainly of the paths and ways which lead to it.

Despite of the fact that the very word "Buddha" means "the Awakened", should we look for any reference to any concept similar to such spiritual Awakening in the Pāli texts, we shall find none! And the more we concentrate our search in this text on deliverance and emancipation and the path leading thereto, in hopes of finding any similar idea of spiritual awakening, the more we discover rather its utter absence, and find nothing resembling it beyond *Ñāna* or gnosis. But though in some cases across the text such gnosis is shown to arise suddenly or indeed spontaneously upon hearing a verse on conditionality for example, yet it is otherwise standardly described as an event of intuitive grasp of conditionality and conditioned existence, and a recognition of the prospect and ultimate reality of deliverance therefrom, and nothing beyond that. And further, such deliverance from conditionality and Oblivion is described rather as a process of *gradual* reversal or transcendence of natural mental functions, rather than as an impressive event of recovery or vivification of some intrinsic gnosis or wisdom that already exists in some dormant form within some conscious essence. The difference is so clear to the extent that we can say that such gradual process of mental and psychological transformation which is what constitutes the Theravada path of practice, is itself the Awakening, only instead of leading to the arousal of some transcendental pure or perfected essence, this process of transformation reaches its final point of consummation rather in the extinction and cessation of a mundane, natural,

animal-like essence; precisely that which is comprised in conditioned motivation and stimulation. And though such transcendence of nature and the ego in the consciousness of the individual may indeed be accompanied by the presence of an impressive, indescribable transcendental gnosis; yet such gnosis itself is also a result of the process of gradual psychological transformation and is not independent from it, and therefore does not represent in itself some force or entity inherently buried deep within the consciousness.

Thus there is a reason why the Theravadin path is characterised by its attention to the basics and foundations of mental development, and how progress in it is characteristically gradual, and how no gnosis or awakening is sought or experienced through it beyond that very gradual process of mental transformation. The difference between Theravada and other traditions in this domain also manifests itself in the absence of any particular emphasis on the necessity of an awakened teacher through whom the vivification of the transcendental consciousness can be successfully induced in the learner. Instead the Pāli text reveals a rational and comprehensive system of cognitive-behavioural training that can be applied by whomever understands it, even if just in part, and which impact and effects are readily visible (*sanditthika*) and verifiable (*ehipassika*) in one's own psychological experience. And though there may exist certain curious or enigmatic features of this path of mental transformation that are yet not easily explainable or describable, including as we have just seen, the inception or awakening of faith itself, yet there is in the Theravadin path of practice all the information that one needs in order to be able to verify the reality of its emancipatory impact and efficacy, and no faith is required beyond or independently from this very possibility of a corresponding verification, and further, a stronger faith consists precisely in a more thorough such examination and verification. Such *dhamma-sudhammatā*, the internal consistency, logic, and integrity of arguments and of their demonstrable correlations, and of the possibility of their testing and verification in subjective and empirical observation, is a major characteristic of the Theravadin path, and is something to which the Buddha repeatedly refers as evidence of the excellence of the truth to which he awoke, and as what it takes in order for one to develop and sustain a robust faith.

Next to gnosis and faith, we find in our search after what is it that may resemble spiritual Awakening in the Pāli text and in practice experience, three further miraculous and highly enigmatic human mental capacities that are essential for the realisation of deliverance: the conscience, mental calm or attentional repose, and self-awareness, of which I shall now offer a brief description.

5.2 The Conscience (Sīla)

In a certain sense, the conscience seems to represent a sort of ultimate value-system from which there is no escape and with which one cannot argue, and which indeed exists inherently in every human heart, to an extent or another. And indeed, it is a force that can be "awoken" and vivified in one person, remain dormant in another, or be suppressed or muffled in yet another – and many narratives show clearly how certain developmental moral conditions in early childhood, can later result in an adult who is either a gentle carer or a violent abuser. But what is noteworthy is that the impact of conscience manifests in the behaviour even of children, and by whatever degree or intensity it functions, it necessarily and naturally aligns every aspect of mental judgement and action with such sunny values as non-harm, non-cruelty, sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness.

Unfortunately understanding the nature and role of "morality" in a Buddhist context proves to be rather a hard and tricky task, and this being the case perhaps partly because it is not readily easy to distinguish which moral teachings in the Pāli text were given to normal everyday people who sought basic and simple moral precepts to live by, and which teachings exhibit the Buddha's understanding of the *psychological significance of the moral experience* beyond social and cultural temporal and circumstantial sensibilities, norms, and traditions. It is evidently the latter that concerns us most here, especially given that many of the moral precepts that we find in the text were but replicas of those already established by other religions, particularly early Hinduism and Jainism, and which were prevalent in the sociocultural moment or circumstance of the Buddha's Rising, and with which the Buddha evidently sought to coexist, and which, I will venture to say, may have in the course of time finally crept deeply into the Buddhist doctrine to the extent of introducing certain paradoxical elements that are incompatible with the Buddhist understanding of freewill and karma; a situation which manifests most vividly on the practical and experiential levels in the manner by which the understanding and practice of "restraint" has been followed, which I will discuss more closely in the following chapter.

Thus, it will probably be highly contested whether there is any concept of ultimate or absolute moral values in Buddhism, though, on the face of it, any such concept would rather stand out as an oddity amidst every other

Buddhist principle, each of which roots its validity in experiential verifiability and demonstrability (*ehipassika*) and gathers its effective momentum from usability and pragmatism (*opanayika*). Further, concepts of ultimate transcendental moral values in the style of Immanuel Kant have been frequently challenged by countless quandaries of unsolvable ethical dilemmas where moral fault can be found in any possible course of action, or even in non-action. For we know that there are such occasions when cruelty and aggression, for example, are needed to fend against some danger or fight off some immorality, or when jealousy and envy (competition) function as the most effective means by which motivation can be aroused. The great story of evolution is itself nothing other than a story of competing genes, which through their natural competition equip the living creature with increasingly and continually more adaptive nerves, organs, bones, muscles, and skins, with which to outwear the strength or stamina of both its predators and prey, or outwit their cunning. We have already seen how there is no survival for any species and no perpetual festival of unfolding life and death on earth without such evolutionary self-obsessed possessive and aversive impulses, and when we speak of the evolution and survival of species as a whole, what we are referring to in fact is nothing other than the continual evolution and manifestation of these most basic impulses of self-obsession on the level of every individual organism that forms any given species.

We have also seen how "moral culture" as an exclusively human phenomenon was and is an attempt to handle such intrinsic violence of conditioned existence through cultural, religious, and legal means that are more rational and less brutal; yet, not only does this attempt fail in erasing every trace of such natural intrinsic violence on both individual and social levels, but also, such collective moral culture becomes itself something that *competes and clashes* with other moral cultures, and functions in the human-world as does the scent which distinguishes one clan from another in the ant-world. And indeed, in their disagreement on the transcendental or rational foundations of ultimate moral values, all the sophistication, certitude, and passion, with which prophets, sages, and philosophers have expressed their opposition to one another, looks from the sublime and secluded distance of Buddhist estrangement and dispassion just like the display of brute mountain goats as they head-butt and lock-horn each other

across the endless plains of high-altitude ideation! Behold this curious scene in which the cruel designs of Nature and devilish subtlety of the ego succeed in engulfing and enveloping the functioning even of human morality, and which human envisages with a highly sophisticated imagination and labours to elevate to a station higher than that of nature and ego, so that he may finally relieve himself from their inherent violence and cruelty, and ends up thereby only exercising them further!!

It seems thus that we can at least be certain that our evaluations of the moral quality of any given action are within a proper Buddhist context when such evaluations are based on discerning the general context in which the action arises, the circumstances which necessitate it, and the motivation which brings it about. The latter, motivation, is of the highest significance in Buddhist practice, and it is here that the pragmatic and teleological nature of morality in Buddhism will appear most vividly. For we find through the Pāli text that, in the Buddha's teachings, the *psychological significance* not only of behaviours, but also of emotions and thoughts, is evaluated and judged according to whether or not the behaviour, emotion, or thought, is enabling or facilitating the process of psychological transformation and progress toward emancipation. The evident principle in Buddhism is that the human conscience is a real mental phenomenon or process, and that it is naturally active – and the Buddha does not set about trying to unravel any transcendental or mundane, spiritual or historical origination or "genealogy" of it, but rather observes as a scientist what is its actual *effect and impact* on the psyche, how does it work, and how it can be *used or instrumentalised* to serve the purpose of mental health and emancipation. Thus, just like faith, morality in Buddhism is an experience that likewise *shows, demonstrates, and proves itself* in experience, to be functionally effective in reinforcing and bringing about certain beneficial psychological results, and as such it is not a Kantian-styled net of fixed positions that rests on some ultimate rational foundations. But it is only on the basis of this deterministic relationship between a mental or bodily or verbal behaviour and its subsequent and corresponding impact on emotion and the state of mind, that the moral significance of that behaviour can with any certainty be discerned in a Buddhist context. This meets well with the general concept of morality in the minds of ancient people before the advent of Semitic religions, as one which is representative more of an inward psychological state than an outward

behavioural, social, or circumstantial condition; that is, a state of an *awakened conscience* rather than behavioural correctness.

Thus a Buddhist moral evaluation of an aversive behaviour that is justified by circumstantial necessity would not be based on any abstract or ultimate moral principles, but rather on the discernment of the possible negative psychological impact of that aversive behaviour on the individual who perpetrates it before that who is subjected to it! And indeed we do find that one of the most common causes of trauma or of moral qualms or guilt, is resolving to an effective violence or cruelty to fend against some imminent danger. At this point the moral condition of the individual becomes indistinguishable from his psychological condition, from a Buddhist point of view, and instead of declaring the reactionary aversive behaviour right or wrong, the question becomes '*with what motivation*' and state of mind was it committed. It is for this reason that *self-awareness* is far more vital in Buddhist practice and soteriology than is behavioural immaculateness, because it is precisely through such self-awareness that the individual will succeed in responding to the danger on the basis of recollection and understanding of the sense of necessity or duty to defend himself or others, rather than on the basis of a passionate, emotional or impulsive fear or cruelty. For it is only in the latter case that the counter-aversive reaction exercises a negative psychological moral impact on one's own psyche, and we find this most commonly in the punishment given by a loving mother or father to their beloved child, and which is often quite necessary in order to regulate the excesses of the child's inclinations and behaviours, and the absence of which represents a serious form of neglect that may result in a delinquent. A parent who is thus aware of the necessity and duty of punishment, and even if he or she *act it out* emotionally so that it may be effective, will not feel guilty about their own punishing behaviour later on; but a parent who substantiates the punishing behaviour with passion and genuine emotional impulsivity, will sooner or later, consciously or unconsciously, suffer the piercing poke of guilt, or even self-contempt!

We find many forms of such self-aware and self-confident moral act of punishment in many of the world's traditions and institutions that are associated with law and justice, starting from the dignified judge who is addressed "Your Honour" in a court of law, and who proclaims the punishment of a wrong-doer with unshakable certitude and confidence on

behalf of the jury or the general population – all the way to the gathering of an African tribe in a tight circle, each with a spear in hand, surrounding a mischievous lion that has dared to transgress on the sheep of the village, and which punishment by no less than death becomes now necessary so as not to expose the village, its livestock and its children, to further possible deadly harm. Here, no jury and no judge carry upon themselves the moral responsibility of the *decision* of lawful and moral killing, and no hangman carries alone the moral responsibility of the lawful act of killing – rather, the chief picks a 'feather', symbolising justice, and throws it in the air directly at the shivering lion trapped and roaring with fear in the middle, and utters unto it poetic stanzas proclaiming the coming punishment as lawful and moral. At this, every last member of the tribe inflicts a wound on the animal, even after it becomes already dead; and so they leave the scene with the cruelty inherent in the act even of righteous and necessary killing, shared by everyone, rather than carried as a crushing burden of only one human conscience. Thus, despite of the utter violence and brutality of the event as it may appear to foreign judgemental eyes, in truth it testifies to nothing other than a highly developed extent of moral sensitivity in these African people!

Thus, the true significance of developing (or awakening) a moral sense of conscience is not to be morally correct or superior in any abstract or rational sense, but rather in reaping the immediate psychological fruits of such development – and one of the most significant such psychological fruits is *anavajja-sukha*, living free of guilt, and which functions as the foundation upon which the further practice of renunciation becomes not only possible or sustainable, but even enjoyable and incomparably blissful. For such psychological condition of "being blameless" or guilt-free comes from both psychological and circumstantial conditions of being independent and disentangled from the world to the extent of having no capacity or potential of exercising a cruel, harmful, or disappointing effect on its inhabitants. The practitioner is here leading a frugal life with minimal needs; he neither expects anything from others, nor expected to provide for or answer to the demands and needs of others; a condition that is of vital significance to the experience of *nekkhamma-somanassa* or renunciate bliss, and which is at the foundation of the Cynic ataraxia.²⁵ And indeed, despite of the fact that

²⁵ "For it is in the natural order of things, monks, that no guilt arises in one whose ways follow from a pure conscience. [...] And it is in the natural order of things that delight is born

Buddhists, Cynics, and Stoics, may have developed different views regarding what constitutes the state of moral excellence and guilt-freeness, and though the Buddha observes non-harm and social withdrawal, Diogenes insults people and masturbates in public, and Marcus Aurelius makes a family, becomes an emperor, and wages long wars, yet each one of them having acted strictly according to their corresponding standards of moral excellence, their subsequent experience of the bliss of being guilt-free is identical – another example of the paramount importance of the psychological result or impact of morality rather than its abstract defining features.

However this bliss of being guilt-free is a spectrum, and the more one goes into renunciation and seclusion the more of it one enjoys. It is experienced in its fullness only when one's desires and behaviours become so free from any social or private compulsions to the extent that one feels assured that he could no longer think or feel or act on the basis of cruelty or desire to harm, and with this confidence in one's own harm-free impulses comes the ultimate bliss of renunciation and of the total freedom from guilt and shame. At this point, the psychological distinction between public and private behaviour vanishes in the experience of the practitioner, and though he may still refrain from acting in certain ways in public that he would still do in private, this would be only due to social customs rather than to anything that is inherently immoral or guilt-inflicting in the act itself. Such purity of the spontaneous intention and action, rare to be found as it is, sometimes bestows upon its bearer an idiosyncratic and odd demeanour and appearance, in that his behaviour outflows with a unique and unfamiliar unrestricted spontaneity from the depth of his heart and without the slightest hesitation or need for restraint – all of which places him in direct contrast with most people whose biggest fear, very often, is their own uncontrolled behaviour and the subsequent shame and guilt it frequently begets. Strangely then, and even in the event of consummate moral purity, the spontaneous behaviour of a saint may possibly be mistaken for that of a reckless or shameless scoundrel, and can certainly be criticised for being

in one who is thus guilt-free." "Dhammatā esā, bhikkhave, yaṃ sīlavato sīlasampannassa avippaṭisāro uppajjati. [...] Dhammatā esā, bhikkhave, yaṃ avippaṭisāriṣṣa pāmojjaṃ jāyati." *Cetanākaraṇīya-sutta* (AN 10.2).

lacking or unsatisfactory according to this or that moral culture – all of which immediately reminds us of Cynicism and of its founder Diogenes!

Juxtaposed with the serious poverty and aloneness of the renunciate and secluded practitioner, we find hidden in the depth of his heart a tremendous wealth and power of certitude and righteousness, which does not come from any sense of moral superiority over others, but only from his inward and private recognition of the situation of having a free and unfettered conscience, and confidence regarding the purpose of his outward behaviour. Such sense of self-righteousness that is not based on the condemnation of or comparison with the morality of others, is a mark of Buddhist nobility, and the slightest progress in renunciation and seclusion, in the most practical terms, leads directly to a concomitant and equal growth in this remarkable and incomparable renunciate bliss. On the other hand, without this inward moral development, and with the consciousness emotionally plunged in all sorts of hurtful behaviours, even subtle ones that are justified by practical necessities, this fundamental awakening of the conscience is arrested or even denied; it remains dormant, and thereby self-awareness also becomes denied and remains dormant. For it is readily visible how the slightest self-awareness cannot possibly coexist peacefully with the slightest guilt; such would be a condition of emotional hardship and cognitive dissonance to which many people, very unfortunately, respond by shutting down their self-awareness rather than embracing it and depending on it to do something about their guilt and agonising conscience!

This indeed is the real paramount utility and significance of morality and the conscience in Buddhism: a sufficiently free and awakened conscience is necessary for the development of self-awareness, which is yet another enigmatic phenomenon of awakening that lies at the centre of all Buddhist practice and wisdom, and which we shall soon examine in some detail.

5.3 Mental Calm (Samādhi)

The human being is imprisoned behind the senses, everything he feels and imagines and prioritises as important, pressing, and urgent, comes from his environment and through the reach of his sensorial experience. The renunciate abides withdrawing the senses from such constant involvement with the immediate environment, not by means of shutting the eyes and closing the ears, but by means of samādhi, which finally enables him to abide contemplating such realities that far transcend the immediate environment: birth, fear, lust, motivation, desire, attachment, restlessness, self-stimulation, depression, conditionality, death, rebirth, gnosis, and deliverance; such subtle and profound realities which do not manifest sensorially in the environment, and which are therefore hidden from the vision of those whose attention is driven solely by the sensorial experience and its hedonic, emotional, and ideational impact.

The main feature of samādhi, which I will here refer to as "mental calm", is the reversal of the natural functioning of the *attention*, in that instead of being dispersed outwardly toward the environment and its manifold sensorial features, it becomes focused inwardly toward the functioning of the mind or body, and instead of being erratic and fluctuating, it becomes stable and sustained, through a prolonged attention-span. Mental calm is thus experienced when the attention becomes freed from its natural compulsion to be drawn toward the pleasurable and to recoil from the painful, and where the attention is no longer stimulated or guided externally through the somatic, emotive, or cognitive impact of the sensorial experience.



Figure 12: A sufficient extent of samādhi is the foundation of Buddhist practice upon which everything else is based; itself representing the finest picture of renunciation and also of Buddhist nobility, where "giving up" on the world and on being reactionary to it, is perhaps best symbolised by the arms and hands being peacefully put down in the posture of meditation, and in the abstinence precisely from motor activity which is itself the very evolutionary origin of erratic attention as a mental faculty.

In order for such mental state of samādhi to happen, the Pāli text repeatedly refers to the necessity of transcending the *nīvaranā*, a set of five intrinsic mental "hindrances" or "handicaps" which hijack the attention away from the state of withdrawal, calm, and focus, and command it to function in one or some of these five ways: either by mobilising it through *displeasure* or *sensual appetite*, or by causing it to plunge in cycles of *abstract discursive queries*, or by agitating or weakening it through either *restlessness* or *lethargy*. These natural mental handicaps often appear and dominate the attention of practitioners when natural environmental stimuli have been filtered out, whether in the context of practising formal meditation or simply in that of abiding in a quiet and secluded physical environment. Despite of the fact that they directly oppose and hinder mental calm, their arousal is actually a very good thing as it allows practitioners to finally see and identify them clearly and directly in experience. The general rule is that if the *nīvaranā* arise, then they exist! That is to say, avoiding and ignoring their presence by stimulating the senses in this or that way does not mean that one has transcended or overcame them, but only escaped from facing them by surrendering one's attention to the world of external stimulation and mental agitation; the exact opposite of samādhi. Thus the spontaneous arousal of the *nīvaranā* is a necessary feature of the practice of samādhi, and though they consistently *feel bad*, yet their arousal and appearance close to the surface of the consciousness and awareness is only a testimony of the mind's gathering momentum toward withdrawal and calm; that's why they are being regarded as hindrances, burdens, or handicaps, as if they are a natural form of mental gravity that aims at retarding or arresting that very gathering momentum of samādhi.

However the *nīvaranā* can also entice and command the attention by offering good feelings, solely on the basis of their capacity to vivify a withdrawn and under-stimulated attention and to arouse it with life and movement. This is not only so in the case of the buzz of sensual perceptions and restless energies, but more so in the subtle case of thought and thinking. When the attention wanders off with the subliminal stream of thought, this happens only because the process of thinking is itself pleurably stimulating in a subtle manner. Such subtle pleasure in thinking is a natural condition that is incredibly profound and is not easy to change, and learning how to grow dispassionate with regard to it is precisely what it takes in order for the

unification or collection of attention, as opposed to its natural dispersed state, to come about spontaneously as a result, and without which there would be no way, say through willpower, to bring about such collectedness and unification of attention. Thus the transcendence of the *nīvaranā* is not accomplished by means of willpower, but only through a gradual process of thorough and sustained dispassionate awareness of them, which is why their arousal and appearance is a good thing and is precisely a necessary condition for their subsequent gradual overcoming. Thus also, and contrary to how it is often regarded, the sustaining of attention on the breath, for example, is not something that the meditator *does*, but rather something that he experiences, something that *happens*, as a natural result of dispassion with regard to increasingly subtle forms of pleasure and pain.

Such reversal of the natural functioning of the attention does not come about readily through an act of will, and instead of presenting itself at our command like an obedient servant that we summon, the attention proves to be persistently unruly and difficult to call and to wield, and very often it is its own intrinsic vigorous spontaneity that pushes our behaviour here and pulls our will there, rather than the other way round. The same goes for the transcendence of the *nīvaranā*, which is very likely to be a long-term pursuit, the progress in which may appear only very gradually and slowly, and will often be accompanied by a degree or another of personality transformation. For the power of these five hindrances vary greatly across individuals, and it generally testifies to, and can be regarded as the measure of the practitioner's sharpness and steadiness of attention and general level of emotional stability and dispassion, or the lack thereof. It is for those reasons that the manipulation of the attention in both meditation and everyday life happens more easily for individuals who are generally more contented and at peace within their hearts, as those five hindrances are very likely to be naturally less intense and frequent in such individuals than in those who are given to resentfulness and discontent.

Though the experience of mental calm is indeed closely connected with formal meditation, it is a big misconception to think that it functions or develops only through or during such formal practice; rather it can be both experienced and developed through everyday life, and some people experience it involuntarily without any training or background in formal meditation, or even interest in spirituality or religion, and it may even grow

so profuse in some practitioners who never practice any formal type of meditation. Despite of the fact that manifold methods were suggested throughout ancient times in various traditions which purported to be the most effective in enhancing the experience of samādhi, in our present time many of these methods are no longer clearly understood, and there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings regarding the very definition of and development of samādhi on an experiential level, and a general lack of appreciation to the fact that the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of any given method corresponds tightly to the unique temperament and natural capacities (or limitations) of every and each individual practitioner. At this point it is important to note that, just as our interest in "conscience" and "morality" went far beyond regarding them as circumstantial social phenomena, our present interest in samādhi, mental calm, and "meditation", goes significantly beyond regarding them as spiritual practices that people do in some ritualistic or routine context, or simply to experience some "inner peace" or some such like "feel-good" state. Rather we are here discussing the impact of this practice on the most fundamental and basic foundation of all mental activity and mental existence: the attention, and which is precisely the very thing which bestows upon samādhi its high station and permanent seat in a great number of spiritual traditions.

Unlike every other natural mental state which we can account for in the evolutionary record, it is not really known how or why this experience of the liberation of the attention from the flux of movement and the command of nature, is at all possible in humans, and we simply have no answer to the question: where does it come from? It has been more recently observed that certain enigmatic behaviours by chimpanzees, such as performing dance-like movements around waterfalls, hurling stones at hollow trees, and constructing rock-mounds which look just like religious shrines or cairns, may be explained as manifestations of some basic or rudimentary spiritual sentiments and practices. For these behaviours serve absolutely no discernable practical purpose, while at the same time they are distinctly different from other behaviours that chimpanzees do by way of playing, and therefore cannot be classed under the category of playful self-stimulation and must therefore be exercised for their stimulating psychological impact in another category of behaviour. Then we also find yet another puzzling behaviour that is characterised precisely by the absence of stimulation,

where certain chimps were observed to sit motionless for significantly long periods of time, watching sunset or doing absolutely nothing other than gazing calmly at the horizon, with a remarkably peaceful countenance shining forth from their visage! We can never know for certain what is the purport of these active and passive unique behaviours, though there is reason to believe that they constitute a unique category of behaviour that is neither play nor rest, and which is unknown in any other animal except only in human, where they find their ready explanation in the human capacity for spiritual sentiments and beliefs.

This indeed is a truly puzzling matter, since even the idea that spirituality may have been an incidental by-product of the development of the imagination, still would not solve it. For samādhi or mental calm is not an *idea*, but an *experience* which human is endowed with a natural *capacity* to directly access. And should an experienced practitioner attempt to trace its inception in his own mental experience back to any discernable point of onset, he will only arrive at the mental determination: "let me experience samādhi!" after which, on their own accord, environmental sensorial stimuli gradually withdraw to the farthest background of perception, the body becomes motionless or moves in conscious patterns (as in yoga, walking meditation, or Sufi meditations), and a bubble of dispassionate and steady attention and awareness forms around one's *nāmarūpa* or bodily and mental existence, decisively separating them from the natural animalistic state of receptive attention, stimulation and reactionariness. All this happens as a spontaneous result of the simple suggestive recollection of samādhi accompanied by the desire to experience it, and sometimes even without any such desire, involuntarily, as the speed of such spontaneous sensorial withdrawal increases the more the practitioner repeats the experience successfully and becomes more proficient in remaining unmoved by gross and subtle sensorial and ideational stimuli.

Thus, that such experience of samādhi at all happens or is at all possible, can in many ways be regarded as incredibly enigmatic and curious! And what is also rather unexplainably curious, is the unique kind of "pleasure" that is associated with it, and which itself facilitates this miraculous sustaining of a prolonged attention-span over inward experiences that are totally non-stimulating, such as the breath, or whatever similar inward experience that succeeds in attracting the attention effectively and continuously. Such

inwardly sustained attention-span finally becomes itself a source of incomparable pleasure, the enjoyment of which allows the practitioner to sustain his attention and maintain the practice. Though such pleasure arises in connection with the body or the sensation of the breath, or with certain kinds of mental lights or soothing visual textures, often of white or bright colour, and which the meditator experiences as salient mental realities rather than images or apparitions – yet such experience of pleasure is exceedingly refined and cannot be adequately described in language, especially as it finally reaches *jhāna* the moment the attention crosses a certain threshold of steadiness, collectedness, and momentum, leading further to such an enigmatic point of climactic pleasure of absorption which seem rather antithetical to that which is experienced in mundane settings, when the attention is likewise absorbed, yet rather *externally conditioned* by some environmental attractive and pleasurable stimulating object or experience, as in sexual orgasm. This is the main point of difference between meditative and sensual pleasure, precisely the constant presence of self-awareness in the first case, and its utter absence in the latter, which, I contend, precisely depicts the difference between a noble and an animal bliss!

In the time of the Buddha it seems that a certain tradition existed which regarded this *samādhi* to represent the highest transcendental bliss, and just as in the *ataraxia* of Cynicism and Stoicism, the followers of these meditative traditions spent their lives enjoying meditative pleasure with no further purpose or quest, perhaps aside solely from how such practice would lead to the re-materialisation of their consciousness in correspondingly pleasurable angelic realms after their death. But given that *samādhi* was also a conditioned state, and one which did not offer any substantial unconditional and lasting psychological deliverance and, therefore, did not bestow a satisfactory meaning or value on human existence²⁶ – the Pāli text shows the Buddha declaring it to be an *acceptable* form of pleasure for renunciate practitioners, and even promoting it as one which offers a suitable somatic and emotional balance for a renunciate psyche that is deprived from natural stimulation and constantly pressured by it. Irrespective of the quality of the pleasure which it naturally offered, *samādhi* was promoted by the Buddha primarily as a practice which facilitated the faring of renunciate practitioners

²⁶ See *Atthakanāgara-sutta* (MN 52).

along the ennobling path to emancipation, in that it reinforced rather than challenged the type of dispassionate attention upon which progress and the accomplishment of the task depends.²⁷

This indeed is one of the most vital benefits of samādhi, that it allows the psyche to develop an increasingly refined *taste* of pleasure, and to grow at the same time capable of detecting increasingly subtle forms of grossness in such pleasures that are commonly regarded as normal or even refined, such as those we find in the 'arts' which Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard extol for offering to human in mundane contexts what the jhāna offer to renunciate practitioners in a transcendental context. The reality of such grossness of mundane pleasures is not in any way based on any value-judgement, but solely on how their effectiveness depends entirely on a degree or another of an external sensorial or ideational stimulation and attraction of the attention, and how such conditioning necessarily involves a degree or another of attentional friction, agitation and tension, at least in comparison to the pleasurable repose realised in the meditative experience and in which the attention becomes free from any such external conditioning.

Thus the extent by which a certain pleasure is gross, or involves grossness, is definable by and equally proportional to the extent by which it conditions the attention and suppresses dispassion and self-awareness – hence is the ultimate grossness associated with sexual gratification, the climactic pleasure of which occurs precisely due to its capacity to condition the attention entirely, and the indulgence in which is instantly reduced or altogether denied at the slightest arousal of self-awareness. Thus, the Buddha finally described even these samādhi-pleasures as ones that are of a 'coarse' nature;²⁸ not when compared to mundane sensorial pleasures, but only when compared to nibbāna, and even as the meditator advances in their experience to such a refined extent that yet another bubble forms around the consciousness and separates it even from the body and from any physical or sensorial perceptions (*arūpajhāna*); even then, the Buddha equated the very conditionality of these experiences with their grossness, and despite of being so far removed in their refinement from the mundane pleasures of the senses and the flesh, they were still in turn far removed from the transcendental and

²⁷ See for example *Sekha-sutta* (MN 53), *Latukikopama-sutta* (MN 66), and *Nalakapāna-sutta* (MN 68).

²⁸ "Tayidaṇṇaṃ saṅkhatāṇaṃ oḷārikaṇṇaṃ." *Pañcattaya-sutta* (MN 102).

ultimate bliss of nibbāna, where the last and faintest trace of any conditioned attention finally vanishes.

One then cannot help but think that, just as the five mental hindrances represent a fundamental aspect of our conditioned minds, samādhi seem also to represent a fundamental, inherent capacity to experience freedom from environmental attentional conditioning. Where do both phenomena come from can only be a matter of cosmological contemplation, and will only lend us back to the duality between the reality of conditionality and oblivion, and the capacity for gnosis and deliverance. In all cases, and wherever it was historically found, the practice of samādhi in one form or another was always associated with spiritual striving and functioned as its very basis and foundation; for it is on the basis of such miraculous mental calm which envelops the practitioner and affords him with the possibility of liberating the attention from the yoke of nature, that mundane colourful stimuli do not continually obsess his mind and elicit in him a conditioned response as they necessarily do in the animal. As such samādhi is at the foundation of Buddhist nobility and renunciation, and indeed it is one of the most visibly identifiable marks in the behaviour of practitioners, where it often manifests its psychological effects visibly in the outward appearance and demeanour of those who experience it, and is consistently quite an impressive and inspiring thing to see, and alike to those who understand it and those who don't! For such manifestation of it in the outer appearance of the individual happens involuntarily, and as such exhibits a rare authenticity and sincerity. As such it perhaps represents one of those very rare occasions, for the people of the world, to witness something which apparent sublimity matches exactly the inward essence from which it comes, without deceit, conceit, grandeur, or fancy; and it will be a phenomenon that attracts and intrigues its viewers, and perhaps deeply so, precisely by manifesting its health, freedom and transcendence away from about everything else in the world that secures its power of attraction only by means of excitement, thrill, and emotion.

5.4 Self-Awareness (Sati & Pañña)

"What we determine we often break. Purpose is but the slave to memory." –William Shakespeare

Though samādhi or mental calm succeeds in rendering steady and collected the human attention in the face of both pleasure and pain, and thereby affords the awareness with the possibility of investigating and understanding them with dispassionate neutrality; the very motivation to embark on such dispassionate investigation of one's own experience of pleasure and pain is something that goes directly against the innermost nature of the mind and the ego, and the most deeply rooted faith in Buddhist soteriology and desire for emancipation, will alone not suffice in reverting the natural fundamental habit of the mind to seek pleasure and escape pain. A further force is needed; one that will succeed in transforming the train of thoughts and memories and impressions of the mind in such a way as to align them with such noble faith and motivation; this force is "self-awareness", the most central and pivotal aspect of all Buddhist practice, and to which the Pāli text refers in so many different words, most notably *sati* and *pañña*.²⁹

Directly on the basis of samādhi there develops such wise self-awareness, as a state of discerning attentiveness to the functions of the mind and the ego at all times, and not only in the context of formal meditative practices. One could say that the major difference between mental calm and self-awareness is that the first is sensitive and fragile, the latter robust and resilient, and that's why we rely on it to guide our attention in everyday life, when the senses will be continuously bombarded by all sorts of environmental stimuli, and body and mind will be required to act and respond to cues and demands of physical and social nature, rather than solely to inward mental stimuli as is the case in meditation.

²⁹ Though "pañña" more commonly stands for "wisdom", yet contrary to how this word is usually understood, mostly as "knowing or understanding *things*", in Buddhism as in ancient Greek thought, wisdom and knowledge in general are rather centred around understanding oneself and the nature in which one exists, and knowing what it takes to carry one's existence beyond suffering, across a meaningful way of life, and toward some noble goal or end.

The second major difference between samādhi and self-awareness is that the purpose of the latter is not the stilling and suspension of various conditioned mental variables, or the temporal transcendence of their somatic, emotional, and cognitive impact, but rather identifying and understanding the realities of that very conditionality, stimulation, and oblivion, as they ceaselessly manifest throughout all mental experience. In other words, the vital aim of self-awareness (and of the *satipatthānā* for that matter), is to separate the attention from bodily, hedonic, emotional, and cognitive spontaneous or natural activity; which is precisely *to separate the awareness from the ego or sense of self*, and the result of which is a transcendental awareness that sees the functions of mind as "naturally-occurring phenomena" rather than phenomena that "I do" or that are "happening to me".³⁰

The manner by which such transcendental self-awareness or wisdom function will be readily understood if we were to discern it predominantly as a form of *memory* and *thought*, since as we have seen, being able to see the significance, meaning, or purport of any given experience as one thing rather than another, is only an event of attention and memory, or as William James puts it: "Every stir in the wood is for the hunter his game; for the fugitive his pursuers."³¹ Thus, recognising in any experience the features of oblivion and gnosis, conditionality and unconditioning, pleasure and the withdrawal therefrom, pain and its overcoming, is no more than an exercise of memory and remembering, which is what sati is par excellence.

The significance of self-awareness in this regard is that it is the only force with which the *recurrence and transformation of memories* can be regulated, so that the appearance of hedonic, emotional, and ideational natural stimuli result less in reactionary conditioned memories and perceptions of lust and fear for example, while at the same time elicit more memories and perceptions of alienation and dispassion. This is precisely the mechanism by means of which enticing and repulsive and fearful stimulating objects of nature gradually cease to exercise their natural conditional effect on the mind, and the functioning of which we shall now examine in some detail:

³⁰ "To regard [one's own] conditionality as a morbid externality; not myself or what I am." "Saṅkhāre parato passa, dukkhato mā ca attato." *Ānanda-sutta* (SN 8.4).

³¹ William James (1890). *The Principles of Psychology*.

Just as the mind applies a "somatic marking" of every experience as either pleasure and useful or pain and hurtful,³² and thereby the organism learns what to seek and what to avoid; a faith in any purpose, whether transcendental or mundane, functions as a "*cognitive marker*" that likewise classifies all experience as either positive or negative in relation to the realisation of such faith or purpose, which could be conceptualised independently from, or even in opposition to the designs of nature. Such cognitive marking is precisely what habituates the mind to see in experience its transcendental rather than mundane significance, such as to see suffering in normalcy and pleasure in renunciation. But where somatic marking is predominantly spontaneous and unconscious, such cognitive marking of experience is necessarily conscious and happens only in the state of self-awareness; and indulgence in the pleasure of watching TV, for example, becomes recognised (or marked) as a "negative" experience only as one becomes aware of how such activity contradicts the goal of studying to pass an exam. Without the arousal of that awareness or memory of the exam to be passed, the experience of watching TV will continue to be marked as pleurably stimulating and thereby continue to command the attention. Established solely on one's faith and motivation toward a certain goal, self-awareness spontaneously and instantly '*knows*' what is harmful and what is nourishing in the context of that faith and motivation, and the subsequent cognitive marking of experience likewise happens spontaneously and instantly. This, as we shall see further, is a very important starting point out of which "effort" becomes aligned with one's unnatural or transcendental goals.

As we have seen, it is not possible to *intend* to remember or think of any particular object and bring it to awareness and retain it there, or prohibit the memory or thought of other objects; rather objects appear and disappear on their own accord in the mind-stream based on the intensity of their stimulating effect. Thus, a certain desire for self-stimulation will naturally cause the host of corresponding memories, thoughts and impressions, to

³² Antonio Damasio (1991). *Somatic Markers and the Guidance of Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press. || Bechara, A.; Damasio, A.R. (2005). *The somatic marker hypothesis: A neural theory of economic decision*. Games and Economic Behavior. 52(2): 336–372.

pop-up in the mind-stream spontaneously, that is, become remembered, and as they succeed in providing that very desired self-stimulation, they then become marked as "positive" or "good". The paradox lies in that an experience hedonically or emotionally marked as "positive" in the design of nature, may at the same time be cognitively marked as "negative" in the context of one's cognitive faith, and vice versa; and the awareness becomes torn by two contradictory and irreconcilable impulses arising together at the same time, the one hedonic or emotional (watching TV), the other ideational (studying to pass the exam), each laying claim over the very attention and motivation and action of the individual, each promising retribution of pain should they become unfulfilled! The successful pursuit of any unnatural end, whether transcendental or mundane, is strongly dependent on knowing how to handle this situation and will be covered later under our discussion of "restraint".

Thus, the cognitive marking of an experience as "bad", as in the desire to watch TV, does not necessarily disarm it of its hedonic or emotional pleasurable impact, and may even increase its stimulating effect and the frequency of its arousal in the mind-stream or memory (i.e. "the forbidden is desirable", an example of which we have already seen in the impossibility of not remembering the prohibited object in our meditative exercise). This differs from a hedonic or emotional marking of an experience as "negative", as in the remembering of a lost infant, which as we have seen succeeds in decreasing the frequency of this memory in the course of time. This explains why the Buddha emphasised the importance of dispassion across the board of emotion, that is, in relation not only to pain, but also pleasure. The natural hedonic or emotional marking of experience is precisely what we refer to as "*vedanā*", and the Buddha discerned that there can only be one result out of this natural process: a mind-stream that is unfolding according to an increasing desire for pleasure and fear of pain, to which we refer as "*tanhā*". The role of self-awareness is to gradually decrease this most fundamental natural process of hedonic or emotional marking of experience, by maintaining dispassionate awareness not of the experience itself, but rather of that very process of *preference and taste*, as it unfolds in the present moment; that is, to recognise or become aware of the pleasurable effect of watching TV or pain of not watching it and forcing oneself to study, instead of indulging obviously in this pleasure or suffering mindlessly of that pain.

The consequence of such dispassionate self-awareness of the *very sensations* of pleasure and pain is that it at once prohibits further hedonic and emotional conditioning and allows for a fuller cognitive marking of the corresponding experience. That is to say, awareness of the *raw pleasure* of watching TV prohibits precisely the perpetuation of further positive marking of it, rendering that very pleasure of watching TV increasingly ineffective, while at the same time stimulates the arousal in the mind-stream of the memory of one's goal or purpose (studying), which the experience of watching TV contradicts. Such irreconcilability between self-awareness and pleasure is most evident in the sexual experience, where the extent of libido is inversely proportional to the extent of self-awareness, and thus, sustaining self-awareness with regard to the pleasurable in experience renders that experience increasingly non-pleasurable. The same applies to painful rather than pleasurable stimuli, with the only difference being that the awareness encounters "depression" rather than stimulation as the emotional condition of painful experiences; and in likewise manner, sustaining awareness over the *raw sensation* of pain or mental state of depression renders them less painful or depressing in the course of time.

At this point appears evidently the significance of samādhi or mental calm as the foundation upon which the attention can harness the resilience and repose with which to remain unmoved by pleasurable and painful stimuli, even extreme doses of them. And this again shows us how the gradual transcendence of hedonic and emotional impulses is something that *could* happen independently from any cognitive transformation, faith, or wisdom, but only on the basis of behavioural training and conditioning, which is what samādhi or the practice of mental calm actually is. That is to say, habituating the mind in mental calm is alone sufficient in causing the sight of a snake, for example, to elicit less fear, independently from any cognitive transformation of the world-view where snakes continue to be regarded as deadly dangerous. The emotional reactionary momentum of the mind *itself* transforms; precisely, it *diminishes* through such meditative exercise of self-awareness of the emotional experience *itself*, and even as natural or acquired cognitive constructs which substantiate the emotional purport or significance of sensorial stimuli persist. However such mental calm does not lead to the total transcendence of neither the emotional nor the cognitive impact of stimuli, and that is precisely why even the most

thorough advances in its practice do not deliver the consciousness beyond conditioned existence. Thus, *pañña* as a concomitant force or process of cognitive transformation is indeed necessary in order for the consciousness to finally transcend the very habit or capacity of *being stimulated*, which is precisely what *bhava-nirodha* or final deliverance is.

The behavioural foundation of mental calm functions as a necessary support for that further process of cognitive transformation (*samādhi* → *pañña*), and by means of which the consciousness becomes increasingly liberated and ennobled. Such radical and transcendental cognitive transformation of world-view and self-view to the extent that nothing in experience can no more exercise any spontaneous stimulating effect or elicit any conditioned mental response on the psyche, is nothing beyond the transformation of what pops-up in the stream of memory, thought, and awareness, as the senses engage with the manifestations of life and existence, including one's own existence. Thus, the reason a naked body, for example, arouses in the mind of a Buddhist practitioner the perception of a corpse, death and decay, rather than either lust or repulsion, is that he has developed the sufficient mental calm with which to ponder and contemplate the body independently from any passions, and then trained and habituated the cognition to see precisely the qualities and realities of conditionality and suffering in the body, until at last the appearance of it spontaneously and intuitively gave rise to *asubha-saññā*, a perception or memory of neither attraction nor repulsion, but only of the conditioned nature of human corporeality, and of its decay and death.

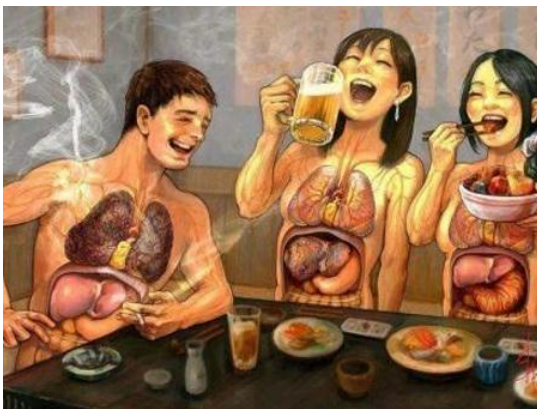


Figure 13: "Head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, joints-fluid, and urine." – A mendicant newly going-forth in the Theravada monastic order is traditionally instructed during the ordination ceremony to practice *paṭikkūlamānasikāra*; contemplate and meditate on the conditioned nature of a subset or all of these bodily phenomena, in a manner that will transform his natural and habitual hedonic or emotional perceptions of human corporeal existence.

The same process of cognitive training and transformation applies to about every other object and experience which conditional effect and impact comes under the light of self-awareness, and as such, we can indeed regard such self-awareness and the *pañña* or cognitive transformation to which it gives rise, perhaps as an experience of Awakening or the arousal of the transcendental Knower or Seer or Buddha-Nature and so forth. But, back to the ground: we rather find that despite of all his training and progress, and possible partial awakening; the sight of the same naked body *can still* elicit lustful or repulsive perceptions in the same practitioner, and he couldn't stipulate through any pre-established decision or act of will what perception will be aroused in his mind-stream the moment his eyes see the object, as both forces of oblivion and awakening *continue* to operate through his mind. In order to deliver himself from the final traces of such naturally and habitually conditioned perceptions, the practitioner must then habituate and condition the mind *further* into a transcendental view of things, and such can be accomplished only by means of sustaining the practice of self-awareness so that increasingly subtle functions of the natural and egoist mind are revealed and transcended, gradually and by degrees, until nothing is left out, and no single conditional function remains active in secret at a deeper or darker recess of the mind, beyond the illuminating power of self-awareness. The practice of self-awareness thus reduces the frequency of natural or habitual (karmic) perceptions or memories, increases that of transcendental perceptions or memories, and progressively expands its reach to increasingly subtle sensorial and mental phenomena.

Luckily, the slightest reduction of somatic and emotional markings of experience gives room for a more vigorous cognitive marking; that is, the less we see things hedonically and emotionally, the more we depend on the cognition, imagination and reasoning, in our evaluation of their significance. This is part and parcel of the idea of "being human" and, particularly, being "civilised" and "cultured". A "noble prince or princess" of the royal courts, or a "gentleman or gentlewoman" of society, are all but references to such individuals whose perceptions are more cognitive than hedonic or emotional. As such the cognitive evaluation of experience, though may also be spontaneous, conditioned, and self-unconscious, manifests predominantly as a form of an *inhibitory or regulative awareness*, that balances one's otherwise hedonic or emotional impulsivity. It is precisely through such

process of inhibitory cognitive evaluation that we come to realise what kinds of behaviour are socially unacceptable or blameworthy, what risks are not worth taking, and what aspects of experience in general are to be avoided – much of which is lacking in individuals who are characteristically impulsive, or in those with a damaged ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and who thereby end up being exposed to higher ranges and intensities of risky and dangerous behaviour, including criminality, given their inability to regulate and contain their own impulses within more safe contours.

This reveals the vital significance of the practice of self-awareness as a process of cognitive (re)evaluation and (re)examination of one's impulses that were before that rather habitually and behaviourally reinforced, and which may have indeed been causing a wide-range of unnecessary and avoidable suffering, and further, it shows how such practice of self-awareness fashions and conditions further learning and the transformation of memory and motivation. For as we have seen above through our exploration of "cognition", motivation indeed functions as a stream, a mode of emotive or conceptual memory that is constantly in a state of potency to generate behaviour; once the organism perceives in the environment those stimuli which correspond to this memory, its potential materialises automatically and gives rise to a corresponding behaviour. This is the proper way to understand the experiment of Benjamin Libet,³³ where the onset of cerebral functions associated with motor behaviour (flicking the wrist) were found to precede the participant's conscious awareness of the very decision to move his wrist, and which led the researcher to the revolutionary conclusion that all human cognition and recognition were only *effects* of motivation and effort rather than its causes – as if human was in fact, and not by way of metaphor, a marionette that is predetermined in every possible way through its physical brain and the nature which fashioned it; a creature which comes to be aware of its behaviour and intent to act only after all such decisions have been already made by some enigmatic inaccessible force that operate in its brains or through its nervous system!

But when we understand how motivation functions as a form of *remembering*, which comes to the surface of consciousness once

³³ Libet, Benjamin; et al. (1983). *Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential)*. Brain. 106(3): 623–42.

environmental stimuli evoke it, this explains how the arousal of that memory from the state of potency may, neurologically speaking, communicate with motor functions faster than cognitive ones, and thereby induces the body to action while at the same time report its own activity to the awareness; the latter happening slightly after the first; the evolutionary utility of which is readily recognisable and is already demonstrable in all sorts of muscular reflexes, the awareness of which by the organism comes only after their behavioural onset. Thus, the participant in Libet's experiment had made the decision to flick his wrist long before the beginning of the experiment itself, when he was being informed about its proceedings and agreed to flick his wrist then. What happened for the participant is that the sensorial situation activated that pre-established memory or potential motivation of action, and what both the participant and Libet misunderstood as a fresh event of decision-making and exercise of will, intentionality, and agency, was merely the transformation of a simple retentive memory or potential motivation into that of an actualised muscular effort, in exactly the same fashion as the sight of a snake vivifies a memory of danger and gives rise to muscular reflexes slightly before the onset of the emotion of fear itself, let alone the cognitive evaluation of the situation. Thus, motivation and effort do not fall out of the neural sky, but are rather firmly grounded in emotional and cognitive memories, and it is for this reason that such memory and the belief-system or faith which fashions it may be regarded as what constitutes the innermost, but fluid and transformable essence of the living being.

What this picture shows is how we couldn't possibly directly manipulate motivation and effort, or directly control our behaviour, but that it is only through tapping into the cognitive processes of memory that motivation and effort become subsequently maintained or modified, or ceased, and it is precisely through an increasingly cognitive marking and evaluation of self-reflective experience that such learning and transformation of perceptions and memories occur. This is precisely why nearly all religions as well as certain secular disciplines, highly emphasise one form or another of the *external conditioning of memory*, that is, exposing one's mind more frequently to teachings or discourses that recall the attention in the present moment from its naturally wandering and dispersed, or sensorially, hedonically, or emotionally conditioned state, to become reoriented and focused on one's transcendental or unnatural goal or purpose. Such repeated

external arousal of select objects or memories in the mind-stream helps increase their *momentum*, that is, make their arousal more frequent and more spontaneous at a later point, with decreasing need for external stimuli to evoke and sustain them. A vivid example of this natural process of the external conditioning of memory is what happens to most people at young age when, before developing yet a more stable character of personality, they start spontaneously and involuntarily mimicking the style of talking and outward behaviour of their favourite friends and with whom they spent the most time. The mere repeated exposure of the senses to an experience that we like or value naturally saturates the memory with the features of that experience and increases the frequency of their arousal in the mind-stream; motivation and action follow directly from such conditioned memory and are fashioned by it.

We normally do not need such external stimuli to arouse mundane goal-oriented memories simply because their significance or urgency allow them to pop-up in the mind-stream naturally, or even excessively and obsessively, but indeed many of us use various sorts of sensorial reminders (alarms) of tasks that are not urgent or boring and which therefore can easily become forgotten. Likewise, the use of external stimuli in religious and spiritual practices, which could be auditory as mantras, repeated prayers, sounds of bells and various forms of music and chanting, or visual as candles, flowers, and water, or olfactory as incense, function as aids to the arousal of a memory of such subtle and transcendental perceptions as Gnosis and Oblivion, God and Satan, heaven and hell, life and death, nobility and animality, rebirth and nibbāna; all of which are less likely to arise spontaneously in the mind-stream and, further, may often become wholly forgotten!

Wholly forgotten, indeed, can easily become all such transcendental realities that we even already believe in without any doubt! We would think that the advent of death is the most *convincing* event one could ever experience, and that, if only one was to remember it, *as an experience* rather than as an idea, there would be no way to go about one's business in a subsequent life forgetful of the reality of death, its eventuality and its ever-present nearness. We would think that we would then live constantly *informed by death*, guided in our thoughts, motivation and effort, by the persistent memory of it and constant awareness of its impact. But the

experience of people who do remember their past life and death shows otherwise! Though many of them do exhibit a distinct melancholic sentiment and strong spiritual inclinations in very young age, as the memory of death, the trauma of all traumas, at that point presents itself to their consciousness vividly and intensely – yet sooner or later the power and persistence of that memory begins to fade, making way for the generation of new perceptions and memories, which, surprisingly, can be totally mundane and divorced from any transcendental concerns, as the person plunges in this new life just like everyone else, mobilised by the exact same habits which mobilised his consciousness in the past and which brings his being here now, and to which he remains oblivious. The mere remembering of the *experience* of death is indeed a great and powerful stimulus for one to see the glaring reality of conditionality, of *one's own* conditionality; but it does not guarantee that such gnosis will happen, or that it will never become forgotten. Rather the different individuals respond to it on the basis of the established and deeply rooted karma and mental habits of their respective consciousness, as the memory of death brings in one a tremor of fear, in another a shudder of awe, and yet in another a grieved aversion so profound that it will mobilise him to seek revenge upon those who murdered him in the previous life! Such is the conditioned nature of the *saññā* or emotional memory which arises upon the recollection even of the actual experience of death.

Thus is the near-interchangeability between motivation and memory, the one directly reinforcing the other and causing it to rise and last in remembrance and thought, or to diminishing and fall into the abyss of forgetfulness. And in as much as all natural motivators and perceptions lead to suffering and reinforce oblivion, the Buddhist path aims precisely at redirecting the functioning of natural motivation and memory so as to render them increasingly transcendental, thereby leading instead to deliverance. Such increasing independence, frequency, and spontaneity of the arousal of transcendental perceptions and memories in the mind-stream, is of great significance in Buddhist soteriology, and it is precisely the phenomenon or process which constitutes the unique gradual Buddhist salvation. The idea is that, the moment such *momentum* of transcendental perceptions and memories passes a certain threshold, there is no going back; and whatever happens after that threshold is passed, the mind-stream could no longer entirely *forget* what it has *known* and *seen*, and therefore the

impact of such memory on the karmic or spontaneous qualities of the consciousness could no longer be undone. That is to say, awakening to one's conditioned existence, seeing one's marionette-like reality, observing the emotional and cognitive strings as they move up and down mobilising the "self" thereby, and discerning Nature and Oblivion as the external and internal manipulators respectively – all this *knowing* and *seeing*, once sustained long enough and with sufficient clarity and intensity in the present moment, can reach a point where the reality of such conditioned existence becomes incontrovertible in one's awareness, and the increasing recollection of it inevitable. Such situation of an on-going transcendental awareness and perception of conditionality in all reality and experience, represents an irrevocable *ñāna* or gnosis.

The cosmological ramifications of such intuitive gnosis are very interesting: The expression *Sotāpatti* literally meets with the English idiom, "*to go with the flow*", but instead of being used in mundane settings, it is being used here as a reference to the first stage of Buddhist deliverance. "*Sota*" here is not some kind of cosmological "stream" upon which the consciousness "enters" as is traditionally understood, but rather the transcendental *course* that is being fashioned by the consciousness's own gnosis and awakened momentum, the moment it crosses a certain threshold of freedom from natural perceptions, memories and motivations, and thereby becomes increasingly established in transcendental ones that are guided by *knowing* and *seeing* suffering and conditionality and the deliverance therefrom. As we have seen, out of such foundation of attention and memory, subsequent motivation and effort conditionally arise, and that's precisely why there can be no going back after this point, as all further motivation and effort inclines likewise increasingly to the transcendental rather than the natural and mundane. After this point there is only more knowing, more seeing, more gnosis, and more awakening, all of which experientially means nothing other than more attention, thought, and memories of the transcendental purport and significance of experience. It thus becomes a self-reinforcing process, where transcendental cognitive functions, such as attention and memory, give rise to transcendental motivation and effort, which in turn orient and mobilise further attention and memory toward the transcendental rather than the natural. "*Sota*" is precisely such irreversible *unfolding* of the consciousness as it continues to

incline toward the transcendental, and to attend to suffering and conditionality and the emancipation therefrom; such is the transcendental, spiritual, emancipatory *flow*, with which the consciousness goes!³⁴

Though at this stage the consciousness is yet far from being actually and experientially free from the strings of nature and the ego, yet it has mustered the sufficient attention, wisdom, awareness, and motivation, with which to never again entirely *forget* their presence and impact. What follows after this point is an irrevocable phase of gradual and continual reversal and diminishing of habitual natural hedonic, emotional and cognitive functions and responses, and a concomitant gradual and continual augmentation of transcendental faith, mental calm, self-awareness, estrangement, dispassion, and renunciation, until the last conditioned mental function has been revealed and transcended. The consciousness becomes *bound* to reach its transcendental destination just as the momentum that drives a moving object attains escape-velocity and is no longer bound to fall back by gravity. The consciousness may not be yet free; but it is bound to become free, and its ultimate freedom becomes only a matter of time.³⁵

Finally, the thing which makes such transcendence difficult is not that the mind is hard to observe and understand generally, but rather that it is hard to *keep up with* in real time, that is, to attend to its functions, to what it is doing, in every present moment, all of which makes it harder to resist or ignore its enticements and stimulating propositions, which contradict the neutral dispassionate spirit of the observing scientist. Thus, it is the tremendous, yet subtle and subliminal vigour and momentum of the natural

³⁴ It seems perfectly apt to adopt "transcendental or emancipatory or spiritual *flow*" as a rendering of *Sotāpatti*, given that "flow" is a term used in positive psychology as a reference to the mental condition of being joyously absorbed and focused in a certain specific or single activity! See Mihaly Csikszentmihályi (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row.

³⁵ The Pāli text lists two further milestones of spiritual emancipation through which the consciousness passes in the course of its unstoppable progress: *Sakadāgāmitā* and *Anāgāmitā*. In the first, lustful and aversive reactions become significantly reduced, and in the second they come to a final end. The final and last stage of deliverance, *arahatta*, is where the consciousness becomes freed from all forms of sensorial and non-sensorial habits or inclinations, any lingering sense of self or egoist inclinations, any conditioned form of stimulation, and the last lingering oblivion or perplexity regarding suffering, conditionality, and their ending.

mind that overpowers dispassionate awareness, not its complexity. The proof of this is that abstract learning about its mechanisms and functions yields but little results in the ability to wield, manipulate, or transcend those functions. Samādhi allows the awareness to keep up with the speed and momentum of mental processes, to render it cool in the face of the ego's wild and violent enticements, and bolsters and emboldens the attention to remain unmoved by pain and to look at it directly with continually open and steady eyes; and it allows the awareness to do all this in relation to increasingly subtle and fleeting and sensitive mental processes and layers of experience. As such it enables the awareness to see the succession of causal links which originate at the deep dark bottom of human nature and the ego, going through cognitive and emotional phases, all the way up to their manifestation in behaviour. This clearly contrasts with normalcy, where if awareness comes at all, it comes only after the manifestation of mental conditions in behaviour and with no chance of discerning their inward mental foundations and origins.

If anything, this chapter at least demonstrates one important thing: the importance and difficulty of using language accurately to report, describe, and capture the reality of subtle spiritual and transcendental experiences, which precisely brings us back to the question with which we started: What is Awakening and what is it that awakens?!

Having paid the closest attention to this question, I finally found that the answer can perhaps be found in the experience of normal waking up, that is, from sleep, and which is known to befall many earnest practitioners right in the middle of the night and after only few hours of sleep, when the wind has stopped, and everything has become silent and serene; the crickets and bugs having terminated their collective song that they had started early on in the evening. Right in the middle of this nothingness, when neither light nor sound exist to stimulate the senses and shake the imagination, you involuntarily wake up with full awareness and sharpness of attention that are seldom experienced even after a good long deep sleep! What is this waking up and what to make of it, if it was not an invitation to wake up also spiritually?! To use this super agile attention and wakefulness to look into the throbbing and pulsating animal existence of oneself, manifesting now

vividly before the awareness in one's very body and stream of consciousness. All that it takes now is for one to emerge from the lying down position and sit restfully, turn the attention inwards, and allow this serene awareness to find its way to the truth; the truth about how all this present existence in oneself, despite of this fleeting serenity and repose, is terribly unclean, painfully debilitating, and void of the slightest meaning or essence, apart only from this very moment of awareness!

But had it been a one-time such attentive and penetrating plunge into the mind that delivered one from the clutches of the ego and strings of nature, perhaps one could then see in awareness itself, that is, the Knower or Seer, some kind of transcendental essence or self. But rather what we find is that attention and self-awareness are themselves erratic and unwieldy, and appear quite clearly rather as *mediums* rather than agents of experience, and the most fundamental and instrumental in the origination and propagation of all experience. Yet they are neutral; in as much as we can exercise them in self-awareness and transcendence, nature and the ego will exercise them for the exact opposite ends. "Nature" and the "ego" are merely words used to communicate ideas here, in experience they are nothing other than *modes of attention and motivation*, and so is "samādhi", "sati", and "pañña", which appear in this context as devoid of any essence whatsoever, aside from their functioning which itself arises based on myriad other mental conditions, and the exercise of which brings about its enlightening and awakening effect only gradually, layer at a time, bit by bit, and at the same time as the onslaughts of nature and ego continue, never stopping, until their total and final defeat.

The archetypal battle between good and evil, Oblivion and Gnosis, or God and Satan, is not one which is fought over a human soul or some other transcendental human essence, but, strictly speaking, over attention and awareness, precisely the mediums through which both the frenzy of life and misery of death, or bliss of transcendence and victory of deliverance, will be reached. Awakening, thus, is not of a thing, but rather of a process, that of attention and awareness; and as such, its awakening and effect can be measured, *by the moment!*

6. Motivation and Effort

Many contradictory ideas have been said about the Buddhist ennobling path of practice. Some say it is extremely difficult and no longer possible for humans to commit to in earnest, while others say it is not only still doable, but even "effortless"! Both positions are problematic. The first denies the single most crucial element of any spiritual or transcendental doctrine, precisely its very emancipatory efficacy and fruit, and without which no intelligent rational human would find reason to cultivate understanding of and faith in it, or invest any purposeful effort in its application or even examination. To the best of my knowledge, no doctrine except for Theravada Buddhism has its soteriology or narrative of emancipation being depicted as something that is exceedingly difficult or even impossible to accomplish; an oddity in the religious world similar to that of a merchant that goes into the great market of goods with nothing to sell! The idea of "effortlessness" on the other hand is so easily confounding, especially to those who struggle with the continually arising subtleties of their practice experience, and who sometimes fail to see progress neither when they put effort nor when they don't. The idea of an effortless path suggests either that one is driven through that path by nothing other than destiny or fate, or that there is a trick to be played, an enigma to be solved, or a hidden wisdom to be acquired, before one could learn what this effortlessness is and how it works, and that once this is done, emancipation follows automatically sometime after that. We shall see through the following pages whether this is entirely true!

In all cases we will have to admit that there is a lot of confusion and disagreement regarding the nature of motivation and effort in Buddhist practice, and indeed, the teachings that we have on these matters in the Pāli text are among the most ambiguous and least consistent, despite of the fact that so much is being said in the text about motivation and effort, and that they are listed as second and third, immediately following the *satipatthānā* or the practice of self-awareness, in the Buddha's training manual called *Bodhipakkhiyādhammā* – all of which definitively indicates that motivation and effort constituted a vital aspect of the Buddha's perspective on practice and in the formulation of his pedagogy. Experience further teaches us that,

however much wisdom, faith, and mental calm, may grow firm and unshakable, it is precisely these three domains of practice, namely self-awareness, motivation and effort, that we find to be continuously wavering and inconstant, as we persevere in our drive to realise emancipation.

Indeed *chanda-nirodha* or the *unconditioning of motivation* constitutes the foundation upon which Buddhist emancipation is based, and is the ultimate guide to the right practice of effort. It is one of the most subtle aspects of Buddhist psychology and practice, and throughout the following pages I shall endeavour to describe it in the simplest possible manner I can.

6.1 An Effective Motivation (Iddhipādā)

The Pāli expression *iddhi-pādā* suggests: "enabling, empowering, or effective foundations." These foundations refer in totality to the necessary kind of *motivation* upon which any successful endeavour depends:³⁶

Picture a chimp being locked in a room with nothing existing in it aside from a chair and a stick. We learned how this chimp will be mobilised by nature to exhaust every possibility of self-stimulation that these two objects can provide; in other words, he will play with the stick and chair, combining them together in all sorts of playful possibilities, until his ego finally normalises with their stimulating effect and as a result they cease to be an effective plaything. Immediately at this point symptoms of depression and anxiety will begin to manifest in the behaviour of the animal, who by now has already learnt that there is no way out of this room, and that nothing in it exists with which to overcome his deadly boredom and restlessness, and quench his intense desire for life and self-stimulation. For whatever length of time that chimp may scream out and show other forms of restless aversion, finally he settles down in one corner of the room, languishing in agony, no longer even aware of the presence of the chair and stick; he suffers and nothing more. Now hang to that chimp a banana from the ceiling, and watch the immense psychological and physiological arousal that will manifest in his behaviour the moment he sees it! Instantly, he springs out of the depressed state, reaches for the chair and mounts it so as to seize the dazzling fruit, and when he finds out that it is yet too high to catch with his hands, he descends to get the stick and returns on top of it to try to bring down the banana with the stick.

The Buddha fully realised this simple, yet fundamental mechanism of life; that most forms of psychological affliction were associated with a troubled or absent stimulation and motivation, and that all that it took for the cessation of such affliction was the presence of some goal or purpose, which the individual believes worth pursuing and which succeeds in eliciting

³⁶ The *Vibhaṅga-sutta* (SN 51.20) and *Chandasamādhī-sutta* (SN 51.13) are perhaps the ultimate sources upon which can be based a sound understanding of the purport of the four *iddhipādā* and of their essential conditional impact on effort. Due to their characteristic ambiguity, these two important discourses are not easily graspable and have not been well-translated.

a proper and effective stimulation and motivation. But we have seen how the joy and delight of the chimp, having finally caught the banana and ate it, lasted but for a fleeting bit, and left his psyche to languish once more, and even with greater restlessness and anguish than before. And then, having been later offered a hundred bananas in the same way, at last even the chase after the banana ceased to exercise any stimulating effect on its ego, which due to the repetition has normalised with that experience too. The Buddha understood this mechanism of diminishing returns too, and it was precisely this understanding that led him to grow disenchanted with mundane pleasures and go forth seeking a form of bliss or release from suffering that did not diminish under any conditions; an unconditioned bliss. Only such transcendental emancipatory end or goal could succeed in eliciting a proper and effective stimulation and motivation from the Buddha and his followers; all else that is under the sway of conditionality, leads to this or that suffering, one way or another.

We have seen how the situation of the trapped chimp does not differ in essence from the life of a normal human being, who is similarly utterly trapped in the world; the only difference being that human does not run out of stimulating play-things, as these exist abundantly, and overwhelmingly so, in his socioeconomic environment, and the significance of which his imagination substantiates to such an extent that he regards them as life-or-death fears or opportunities. But there are such individuals who somehow arise to a feeling or awareness of being trapped, and involuntarily lose every interest in every last plaything that the world and nature offer, and as a result develop psychological and behavioural symptoms that are very similar to those which the trapped chimp exhibits. Those individuals are sometimes diagnosed with depression and schizoid personality disorder, the epidemiology of which among contemporary urban people is rather astoundingly shocking. The trouble of such individuals is precisely that, like spiritual renunciates, no mundane fruit exists for them which succeeds in calling forth their attention or motivation, and at this point, just like the trapped chimp, nothing remains but profound suffering, and further unlike the chimp, it is precisely the overcoming of such deep pain that becomes the only possible opportunity for a meaningful and purposeful life for such individuals. For indeed the transcendence of one's own inward suffering becomes the only possible effective motivator for those who are

disenchanted with all mundane life and living; and it is for such a reason that, though free to plunge in the world, an individual who develops faith in any transcendental soteriology, turns his back to all of the world's mundane features, yearns for a secluded place, voluntarily traps himself there, and abides in silence turning his faculties inwardly, seeking precisely deliverance from all psychological suffering and all existential conditionality.

In an clearly educational context, the Pāli text identifies certain mental features, four in number, that are absolutely necessary for the successful realisation of any pursuit whatsoever, and whether it be mundane or transcendental. The four *iddhipādā* can be found equally in the success of the chimp to reach the banana and in human's attainment of transcendental deliverance; remove just one of them, and no such success can ever be possible:

(*Chanda*): Let us return to the trapped chimp, and see how the first thing which mobilises him to action is, simply, the desire for the banana: it is only on the basis of this desire that he finds himself springing out of his physical inaction and mental affliction at the corner of the room, a state of slumber and hopelessness in which he entered only because he had lost his previous 'desire' to play with the chair and stick. A *motivating desire*, thus, is the original condition of any purposeful action.

(*Viriya*): Out of this motivation comes mental and bodily *effort*, the directed movement toward the banana, which happens through the expenditure of metabolic energy in muscular motricity guided by sensorial intelligence, and without which, say due to illness or injury or laziness, reaching for the banana would be impossible. We could define *chanda* as motivation in a potent, purely cognitive or emotional form, and *virīya* as motivation in action, thus, *effort*. Though two students may both experience the exact same *chanda* or desire to pass an upcoming exam, the presence of *virīya* in one is that which allows him to study to pass the exam, and the absence of it in the other is that which makes him procrastinate. We will later examine why effort varies across individuals with regard to the same goal, and also across time in the one individual in relation to the same goal.

(*Citta*): It is precisely through his effort that the chimp soon learns that the banana is too high to reach, but he does not give up, and his desire for it

does not cease or fade, and he continues to seek it and does not get distracted by any other stimulus or pursuit; this is the third condition: the *singleness of mind and of purpose*, which is precisely nothing other than the *continuity* of desire and effort in relation to the same goal and despite of the challenges faced in reaching it, or simultaneous presence of other stimuli calling the attention – a most important mental capacity of which much will be discussed below.

(*Vīmaṇṣā*): Having failed to catch the banana and having not given up on catching it, the chimp finally wonders: "How can I get it? By what means? What could I still do so that this dazzling fruit ends up in my possession?!" The mere thought of such, which is in the case of chimpanzees intuitive and impulsive, instantly guides the chimp to the chair, which was before that sitting there unnoticed by him, as if it doesn't exist and never existed! This is the fourth and final condition, it refers to both "investigation and discernment", that is, *discovering* or *finding-out* about how something works or what it takes to accomplish something, and it applies also to the kind of examination-in-retrospect which enables us to learn how something we did not intend came to pass.

These are the very basic, foundational requirements for any successful act of reaching either a simple or complex, short-term or long-term goal, whatever it may be; remove just one step and the slightest progress is denied: Without examination and discernment, whether it be intuitive or conceptual, one stands still before the same challenge and cannot move beyond or transcend it. Without singleness of purpose the mind is distracted away from the goal and is spending its effort pursuing something else. Without effort, and even if desire is abundant, there is no chance of progress. And of course, without desire itself, the very object or goal seems to disappear altogether from all thought and memory, just as the chair and stick have ceased to exist in the awareness of the chimp once he lost interest in them, until another stimulus came and turned them into objects of interest and value once more.

Note that the chimp must continue to feel the desire for the banana and maintain his expenditure of attentional and muscular effort throughout the entire process, and must resolve to investigate a second time when he learns that even with the help of the chair the banana is still too high, and

that he needs to utilise the stick in order to finally reach it. Thus the process of reaching even a simple goal involves the continual sustenance and repetition of all four foundations of effective motivation until the goal is reached.

But despite of the uniformity of these four features in everyone's experience of motivation, there are yet significant differences to be recognised in the experience of the chimp, the schizoid, and the renunciate: The renunciate and the schizoid differ from the chimp in that they no longer find the mundane fruit worth pursuing; but further, the schizoid differs from the renunciate in that his withdrawal from the mundane fruit is *involuntary* and unmotivated, whereas such mundane fruit continues to exercise a habitual stimulating effect on the faculties of the renunciate, and therefore he is driven by a conscious motivation to withdraw from it, and he must exercise some kind of responsive *effort* to restrain his own impulses from seeking it, and to maintain his withdrawal and renunciation with regard to it, while at the same time sustain his desire, effort, singleness-of-mind, and discernment, to realise his spiritual or transcendental goal. The story for the renunciate, thus, has yet more chapters in it.

6.2 The Right Exercise of Effort (Sammappadhānā)

*Toward the east the Ganges flows,
Toward the east it turns and slopes,
And the mendicant who dwells in right effort,
Engrossed in right effort;
Toward Deliverance flows,
Toward Deliverance turns and slopes.*
—Buddha (Pācīnādi-sutta)

Such perpetual wavering between two opposite and contradictory forces is a fundamental characteristic of the mental situation in which every Buddhist practitioner necessarily finds himself, and is generally a major theme probably in every spiritual or transcendental doctrine. On the one hand the mind inclines increasingly toward the transcendental, yet continues to revert back to habitual perceptions, memories, impressions, evaluations, thoughts, and impulses – all of which as we have seen arises spontaneously beyond the practitioner's ability of mental control. The Buddha does not speak of practising too much or too little effort, but rather of *the right kind* of effort, which he often describes by means of demonstrating its *effect*, as one which results in inclining the mind increasingly toward transcendental functions up to a point of maximal activity, and increasingly away from natural habitual functions down to a point of cessation.³⁷

Beyond the question concerning the difficulty of the path of practice, and whether or not one needs to put too much effort or none at all, what mattered most for the Buddha was that the practitioner understood how to exercise his motivation and effort *correctly* and *in the right way*, which cumulatively leads toward the goal, and likewise understood what constitutes a wrong or foolish exercise of motivation and effort, which did not lead to any substantial progress or perhaps even to regress. The reason the question concerning the type of motivation and effort is more essential

³⁷ This seems to me to be the message of these remarkable, but highly ambiguous *Pathama-* and *Dutiya- Vihāra suttas*: "One's [appropriate] emotional experience while making an effort to pursue the yet unattained, is determined by one's ability to tame such motivations, thoughts, and memories [as are incompatible with one's pursuit]." (SN 45.11-12). See Mahaviveka (2018). *The Vihāra Sutta Puzzle ... Solved?! Published [online](#)*.

than that concerning their quantity, is that the very difficulty or easiness of practice is very much dependent on whether one is exercising his motivation and effort correctly or wrongly. Thus the story of motivation and effort and their effective and successful exercise in Buddhist practice, commences from and depends on understanding and wisdom, on the basis of which comes the right answer to the question of quantity or *how much* effort?

The answer to both question is thus wholly dependent on the practitioner's understanding of how motivation and effort work *naturally*, and how rather than being personal qualities which belong to oneself or come from one's freewill, they are both rather conditioned functions of nature just like every other mental phenomenon and process, and how their functioning toward or away from any goal whatsoever can be regulated not by direct control, exertion or willpower, but rather by gaining access to those further or deeper, more fundamental psychological functions which condition them. And so the most vital question becomes: What are those functions?

Nature is blind to what human remembers and imagines and desires, it only knows how much "attention" is being expended in any given experience, and how much nourishment, safety, or pleasure, that experience generates in return. Effort is thus nothing other than precisely the exercise of attention, and attention can be regarded as the fundamental *unit of effort*, the most basic force of mind. This is why a successful unconditioning or reengineering of mind necessarily requires tapping into the workings of attention and maintaining a sufficient degree of control over it.

The characteristic experience of difficulty or heaviness that is closely associated with the exercise of attention and effort, is nature's way of ensuring that the limited energy of the living organism is not squandered over useless pursuits, and is strictly reserved for more important ones, according to a fixed hierarchy of survival needs, with such basic drives as escape from predation and pursuit of food and procreation at the top of this hierarchy. Thus the feeling of effort is conditioned by the evolutionary necessity, urgency, or vitality of the activity that is being done, with more urgent situations such as escape from predation allowing for the highest expenditure of attention and metabolic energy, without much feeling of effort or with none at all, and with play or other behaviours based on the

imagination arising with a higher feeling of effort. Such is the mechanism by means of which nature regulates the expenditure of energy in the living organism, and which reflects itself further in the muscular performance of the body, in that, if you are being chased by a wild boar, for example, you will run faster and with less feeling of effort than if it was you who is chasing it, and you will also need more "stamina" to keep chasing it longer, than that which you will need to keep running away from it. Thus the equation is laid out: It is the extent of *urgency* that determines how effort will be felt, the greater the urgency, the lesser the heaviness of effort, and vice versa.

We have seen how "bodily-depression" can be defined as an evolutionary mechanism which prohibits the expenditure of attention and energy on any pursuit in the case of illness, and how mental-depression may likewise be nature's response to any expenditure of attention over an experience that does no longer directly and immediately generate *enough* pleasure and self-stimulation. "Enough" here means: matches the attentional effort that is being spent on it. In more simple words, sustaining one's attention on any task that does not immediately elicit a sufficient level of stimulation, leads to a certain measure of depression. Nature doesn't care whether human is experiencing happy or sad thoughts and memories, but only whether he is healthy and safe and well stimulated by sensorial information. That's why any sadness or melancholy, or any such sentimental turmoil that succeeds in stimulating the mind and thereby proves worthy of the attention being spent on it, will not be punished or suppressed by nature – all of which perhaps explains why crying and weeping have a comforting effect; ironically, there is pleasure in genuine tears! Thus all natural laws and principles unfold in such blind, automatic fashion, through cause and effect, and all that nature does is enable the mind to assess this simple equation and relationship between attention, energy, and pleasure. Every other higher or more complex mental function, such as memory and imagination, arise conditionally based on this fundamental equation, and as we have seen, do not come from any soul, self, agency, conscious intentionality, or freewill. Needless to say that the pursuit after a transcendental salvation is one that is of the highest imaginative sort, to which nature and the ego will put up the highest resistance, precisely, through the regulation and withholding of attention and effort. In less anthropomorphic terms, attention and effort wouldn't flow naturally to

support any kind of highly imaginative or transcendental pursuit, rather, depression will!

It is for this reason that, if there is any role for willpower to play at all in our emancipatory story, then it could only be minimal, and limited to certain specific situations that are mostly of circumstantial moment. For the trouble with the picture of a galloping horse is that the course to salvation may indeed be long, and though willpower is no less than necessary at every moment of a sprint, its utility in a marathon may be limited to those moments when there is pain to be endured, or thoughts of giving-up to be thwarted. From the perspective of nature and the ego, an act of willpower consumes so much mental and vital energy that, though it may be tolerated for a momentary charge of effort or discharge of stress, yet any long-term reliance on it cannot possibly go unpunished, and severely so. Thus willpower readily exists as an accessible means in such momentary situations as jolting oneself out of bed, averting one's eyes and also one's heart away from an enticing sight, freezing the body and shutting the mouth despite of one's own mental burst of aversion or anger, or enduring a bodily form of pain or hardship, but by no means could it possibly be utilised, on the other hand, to turn lethargy into vividness, passion into dispassion, or pain into pleasure, nor even just neutralise any of these states into nothingness. For such would be no less than the extinction of karma and the most fundamental and deeply rooted habits of mind simply by command, and if any such direct manipulation of mental experiences was possible, then anyone could at will be a saint, or a villain, or whatever great thing they might desire, to the extent that nothing would be considered particularly "great" any longer. Employing willpower to reach any long-term end is thus very much similar to a rocket that is being fired into space by moving directly against earth's gravity, and yet the sum of attentional effort or *fuel* which nature affords any human is just about enough to give him at most few centimetres off the ground of Oblivion and conditionality, and immediately, back down he goes!

This very much offers the definition of *sammappadhānā* or "right effort" in a Buddhist renunciate context, as the opposite of that which it means in a mundane context: Where effort for the chimp is entirely comprised in the positive mental and bodily activity which enables it to reach the banana; effort for the renunciate morphs into a passive form, that of becoming

alienated from and unmoved by one's own natural impulse to reach for the mundane fruit. Thus there is in fact no *positive* form of effort similar to that of the chimp in the motivation and effort of a Buddhist practitioner, and he endeavours to reach nibbāna in the fashion of a stream that naturally inclines toward its destination, by growing estranged and dispassionate in relation to all forms of emotional and cognitive natural motivators which continue to impress and mobilise him as they do all oblivious creatures. The effort that we exercise thus takes the form of non-reaction, *wu wei*, and thereby succeeds in disarming experience of that which makes it conditionally substantial or stimulating in any conceivable sense; the result of which is an attention, memory, motivation and effort that naturally and on its own accord *flows* toward deliverance.

Right effort is thus based on a transcendental form of motivation, and indeed one of the fundamental features of nibbāna is precisely *chanda-nirodha* or the absence of any conditioned motivation such as that which manifests in involuntary physiological and emotional effort as we saw in the case of the participant in Libet's experiment and in that of the chimp at the sight of the banana, and which we generally see in the sensorial stimulation of every living creature. The conundrum that we are faced with here is identical to that which we have already examined with *anatta*; that is, in order to arrive at the cessation of conditioned or stimulated motivation, the practitioner must at first rely on some form of motivation with which to succeed in pursuing that very end. Thus is the distinction between two forms of motivation in Buddhist psychology: a transcendental non-stimulated motivation that has its roots in faith and in Buddhist nobility, and a mundane stimulated motivation (*chanda-rāga*) which originates from the oblivious ego and self-obsessed human and animal nature. Thus when we speak of using our natural sense of self in order to finally transcend that very sense of self, this experientially means exactly to diminish our reliance on a conditioned stimulated motivation and increase reliance on a transcendental non-stimulated motivation.³⁸ That much is the dominating significance of motivation in the life of creatures, to the extent that it is indistinguishable from their very sense of self or ego; and that much is the transcendence of

³⁸ "Thus, monks, does one mental condition flows into another and brings it to fullness; allowing for the crossing from this shore [of conditionality] to the farther shore [of deliverance]." "Iti kho, bhikkhave, dhammā dhamme abhisandenti, dhammā dhamme paripūrenti apārā pārāṇ gamanāyā". —*Cetanākaraṇīya-sutta* (AN 10.2, AN 11.2).

ego nothing beyond the transcendence of conditioned and stimulated motivation.

Such transcendence of conditioned motivation however does not mean that all action becomes premeditated, rather the contrary, it becomes wholly spontaneous, but instead of being shaped by natural and karmic mental conditions and characterised by the absence of self-awareness, it becomes now shaped by *pañña* and *ñāna*, intuitive wisdom and gnosis, and characterised by the most unperturbed transcendental self-awareness. The liberated human observes his own unfolding action, discovers it, and understands it, just as if he was watching a movie! He doesn't interfere with what's going on, nor is emotionally affected by it in any substantial way. It is the lifting of the incredibly heavy burden of the deepest habitual and karmic identification with one's own motricity and action, intentionality, agency; the "I do" and the "my doing", the removal of which leaves the consciousness in a state of indescribable lightness, freedom and bliss, with nothing remaining except for the "Knower" or "Seer"; the raw unaffected and indefinite attention span of discerning awareness, which feels something like an everlasting convalescence!

But for a practitioner who is making substantial progress toward such end, his gradual experiencing of a non-stimulated motivation necessarily diminishes even the *emotive dimension* of his own desire toward the goal, and which is precisely what often gives the impression of loss of interest in practice and causes the conceptual conundrum associated with one's awareness of nibbāna as an impersonal experience. However much at first it may be accompanied by boredom, lethargy, and restlessness, the increasing experience of such unconditioned and non-stimulated motivation is yet a sign of great progress and release, and it affords the practitioner with a clue as to whether he is practising correctly. Though he may ascribe such boredom and restlessness to the absence of interest in practice, in truth these are but the *nīvaranā* or profound mental handicaps that we have examined earlier, now surfacing before the consciousness due precisely to the increasing transcendence of the natural, animal-like forms of stimulated motivation.

The hallmark of such progress is twofold: It is characterised by a visible sense of alienation from one's usual and habitual natural effective stimulants

and motivators, accompanied by an absence of any substantial form of depression. That is, objects that used to effectively stimulate the ego through lust and pleasure or aversion and pain, become increasingly less effective, and at the same time this increasing absence of stimulation, though may give rise to boredom, yet does not give rise to depression. For as we have seen, depression arises necessarily as the ego's response to the condition of under-stimulation, but because what the practitioner is here experiencing is not under-stimulation, but rather the transcendence of stimulation, that is, the transformation of the very manner by which he experiences any motivation at all, experiencing it increasingly as an impersonal process; this not only does not give rise to depression, but having persevered through the turmoil and tempest of the process of mental transformation, the practitioner finally arrives at a sense of peace and release, an incomparable bliss which is precisely the fruit of this very progress.

The distinct impact of the *nīvaranā* through this phase of transformation, such as boredom, lethargy, and restlessness, and increased ideation and conceptualisation, along with possible outbursts of emotional impulsivity, appear to resemble the onset of "withdrawal symptoms", similar to those experienced by a drug addict in rehabilitation, and the intensity of which differs according to the intensity of the dependency and addiction, and the endurance of which eventually lends one to deliverance from the addiction. And what dependency and addiction from which the ennobled practitioner is withdrawing here, and for which these afflictive symptoms markedly appear? He is withdrawing from *normalcy*, the state of a naturally conditioned and stimulated motivation, the kind which identifies things as "goals" only through the ego and by means of the ego. But it happens that an impatient practitioner, without help or guidance, may at this point fail to see motivation itself as a conditioned process of nature, and habitually continues to identify with it as if it was coming from his self or represents his self, and thereby feels lost or confounded due to the increasing absence of the stimulation or thrill of motivation at this crucial junction, to the extent of leaving the practice! It is precisely for this reason that "contentment" throughout the path of practice, and in the face of whatever it is that we encounter as we traverse across it, is essential; a point of which much will be discussed further below.

The transformation in one's motivational functions and sense of self marks the difference between two kinds of effort: the first is characterised by exertion, willpower, and desire to control experience and its outcomes, including practice experience, and is analogous to the effort done by a galloping horse in a race contest. The second is characterised by calm, passive observation, and alienation from all experience and dispassion with regard to all its possible outcomes, and is analogous to the slow and steady faring of a camel from one end of a great desert to the other end. It is quite a remarkable comparison, because though the camel's survival depends on the success of reaching the other side before its energy is exhausted, yet it moves toward its goal with steadiness and calmness, possessed exactly of such wisdom and self-awareness as enables it to regulate its expenditure of energy and to squander none in excess, lest it falls short of reaching its destination; thus it fares not in the slightest driven by the kind of frenzy that mobilises the muscles of the horse with great force.

I would then say that, just like the picture of the camel traveling across the great desert, the Buddhist path is one that is effectively *traversable with the least necessary effort*. But I do not go so far as to say that there are no ways to enhance one's effort or hasten one's steps along the path, or that, there may be serious danger in such attempt as that which may befall the camel should it go faster than it could. However and in all cases, as we have just seen, what the "least" and the "most" effort mean in the course of Buddhist practice will have to remain without the domain of willpower, and within such mental and psychological domains as self-awareness and mental calm as we shall see further.

The actual existence of a margin of flexibility between least and most efforts may offer the answer to the question: "Why then, should the Buddha as reported in the Pāli text, place so much emphasis, and frequently so, on exertion and willpower?"³⁹ Precisely due to the effective cognitive impact of

³⁹ Example: "Thus is the state of affairs of a practitioner who has gained faith in the truth declared by the Buddha and who lives enthralled by it: 'Let it be that the flesh and blood of this body should peter out, or that nothing should remain of it but skin, tendons, or just bones; but no repose shall come to relief this my valiant endurance, effort, and perseverance, until the supreme gain toward which I toil has been reached'." *Kīṭāgiri-sutta* (MN 70).

such "motivational speech" on maximising effort within the range in which it can extend further, but not beyond that. For experience teaches us that an inspiring motivational discourse which succeeds in resonating with our faith and convictions, succeeds also in subsequently enhancing our effort quantitatively in terms of duration and frequency, and qualitatively in terms of focused attention; and the evidence of which has been demonstrated in a number of contemporary experimental researches, including one in which subjects who were primed to think more positively of the impact of willpower ended up on average scoring better in exhaustive or *ego-depleting* tasks than those who were primed to think negatively of it.⁴⁰ Thus it appears quite clearly to me that these many documented willpower discourses given by the Buddha, which are remarkably still vibrant with a living effectiveness till today, were given in the spirit of a coach who seeks to motivate those training under him rather than represent a certain psychological understanding of motivation and effort; an interpretation which is readily supported by several other discourses throughout the text, where we find a remarkably developed psychological understanding of the natural functioning of motivation and effort and of their gradual and indirect manipulation.

The question as to the causes or origins of the disparity amongst practitioners in their capacities of exercising effort through the course of practice, is similar to that of why interest and faith in transcendental questions arise in some individuals stronger than in others. This disparity among practitioners is not unique to Buddhist practice, and just as in every other form of experiential practice, we can only observe that such variant limitations of effort are natural, existing beyond the control of the individual practitioner. As such they may be affected by the karmic makeup of the individual, that is, the qualities of the consciousness that were acquired in its past experiences, similarly also to the variance in the power and recurrence of the *nīvaranā* or mental handicaps across individuals. However it is yet important to note that these limitations and constraints of effort can also be acquired, and indeed one of the major factors which determine their intensity and power is the person's upbringing and education. As such they

⁴⁰ Veronika Job et al. (2010). *Ego Depletion—Is It All in Your Head?: Implicit Theories About Willpower Affect Self-Regulation*. Psychological Science. Vol. 21, issue 11, pp. 1686-1693.

are not immutable or unchangeable, and their impact can be gradually and continually transcended through the course of right practice, which is exactly what we should turn to examine now.

6.3 Contentment: What's in the "Present Moment"!

"The good life is that which succeeds in existing for the moment, without reference to past or future, without condemnation or selection, in a state of absolute lightness, and in the finished conviction that there is no difference therefore between the instant and eternity."

—Friedrich Nietzsche (tr. Peter Watson).

"Whoever cannot settle on the threshold of the moment forgetful of the whole past, whoever is incapable of standing on a point like a goddess of victory without vertigo or fear, will never know what happiness is, and worse yet, will never do anything to make others happy."

—Friedrich Nietzsche (tr. Peter Preuss).

The right exercise of effort requires a mature understanding of one's own limitations, not just conceptually or generally, but practically and experientially, from moment to moment. The kind and extent of effort that anyone could exercise when the mind is free from the *nīvaranā* or mental handicaps of lethargy or restlessness, for example, will never be the same as that which can be exercised when the mind is under their sway. However much one may be generally endowed with great faith and unflinching motivation, awareness and understanding of the limitations of effort is necessary for its proper and sound, and effective exercise, and one of the most common reasons of depression and anxiety, and frustration on the path of pursuing both mundane or transcendental goals, is that people attend to their various duties and tasks according to a fixed schedule or time-plan, irrespective of the mental (and also bodily) state in which they may be in at the moment of action and exercise of effort. Applying oneself to any task without being able to summon the right kind and sufficient force of attention and effort, is immediately depressing and painful, even if this condition is only momentary, and particularly if it is extended or permanent.

This is perhaps why Japanese people generally exhibit on average a higher level of satisfaction and contentment in life, precisely because the longer hours that they devote to their work allow them to give it their fullest attention once the conditions of the mind permit and facilitate the type and

extent of required effort. This also explains why falling in deep sleep at the workplace, or in public transportations, is socially accepted in Japanese culture. '*Going with the flow*' of the mind, not trying to wield it or force it, ensures that one will apply oneself to one's duties and tasks when the mind is most fit for its mental requirements, and this guarantees at least a lesser extent of depression in general, and a higher level of confidence in relation to the task at hand. Contentment is thus found precisely in understanding the limitations of one's expanse of effort, being aware of its fluctuations from time to time, and having the humility with which to accept these limitations completely even as one trains to transcend them further.

"Being in the present moment" – one of the most famously repeated Buddhist phrases, does not merely mean to take note of what is happening in the present moment, but also to understand it, and specifically, to understand the suffering and stress which could be generated through the mind's habitual reactions to what's taking place in it, and the way to neutralise such habitual responses or discharge them of their power so that their recurrence and intensity decrease in the future, up to a point of total and final cessation. We have seen how it came to be that one of the most prevalent forms of afflictive attachment in the human world is precisely committing to goals which accomplishment requires more effort than that naturally available to one. The animal and the primitive human are free from such attentional and motivational mode of suffering precisely because they are continuously in their natural element, that is, they operate within the scope of such effort as naturally and readily available and accessible to them *in every present moment*. Heeding such natural limitations of what one can and cannot do in the present moment gives rise to such incomparable contentment and sense of wellbeing, and habituates the mind to grow increasingly attentive and collected, not given to fear or escape in the face of experience. But such ability to abide by one's limitations of effort is strictly conditioned by *the freedom to be nonchalant, undisturbed, and uncaring*, with regard to all that happens beyond one's direct sphere of control and responsibility. This is precisely where renunciation comes in handy, and is no less than necessary, in order for the practitioner to be able to devote himself more completely to the requirements of his own deliverance and to nothing else.

By means of a genuine and thorough renunciation, the grievances and guilt of the past become transcended through forgiveness and the development of a free conscience, and the agitation and worry regarding what could happen in the future become transcended by estrangement and dispassion with regard to the world and the ego, and by the continual recollection of death. The attention finally becomes free to apply itself completely to the present moment without any sense of duty or responsibility beyond the sole task of deliverance, the recurrence of the memory of which, as we have seen, can at this point only increase in the course of time, so long the practitioner is endowed with sufficient motivation, understanding and faith. Renunciation thus offers practitioners constant access to attend to the task of liberation, and the great emphasis which the Buddha places on seclusion and retiring to isolated and quiet places, is due to the fact that such constitutes the best environment which supports the practice of sensorial withdrawal, mental-calm, self-awareness, and the right exercise of effort, in total freedom from mundane physical and social environmental noises, distractions, and entanglements.

Here, the subtle, illusive, and pervasive subliminal stream of ideation, which is almost always verbal, finally manifests visibly, or rather loudly, having withdrawn from sensorial and social stimuli which constantly distract and assail the composure and attention of mind. This offers the practitioner with a great opportunity to learn how to calm such stream of spontaneous ideation, and to sustain constant awareness and estrangement with regard to its ceaseless activity. This constitutes no less than the gradual transcendence of conditioned thought or thinking, which as we have seen is one of the most fundamental foundations of conditioned stimulation and motivation, and which features visibly in many religions, including Buddhism, in an anthropomorphic form as the devil or an evil creature that is possessed of great intelligence and intimate knowledge of our innermost cravings, aversions, and fears, and which, by means of constant speech which it utters subliminally in our minds, succeeds in maintain control over our subsequent motivation and effort.

Yet even in seclusion, understanding and awareness of the limitations of effort should be maintained, as the experience of self-deprivation of sensorial, hedonic, imaginative, and social stimulation, can crush the resolve and motivation of the practitioner if they were undertaken in excess to what

he can naturally sustain; a point at which he will only be exposing the mind to overwhelming doses of depression and pain, and nothing more beyond that. Yet some practitioners argue that the "heroic endurance" of such overwhelming doses of pain through willpower, as in the quote we saw earlier, eventually yields significant results. This may indeed be true but only in the situation where the practitioner is able to sustain *another* heroic self-awareness, estrangement, and dispassion, alongside that of perseverance. The mere endurance of pain, without understanding or awareness, can sometimes spontaneously lead to samādhi, but sooner or later gives rise to morbid forms of exhaustion and frustration, and in disagreement with our *Jain* brothers and sisters, it does not necessarily lead to any progress in the transcendence of karma or one's acquired repertoire of mental habits, nor guarantee that no new mental habits will be developed.

A further important point is the discernment of what opportunities and possibilities of practice the different environments naturally offer or allow for, and how changing one's environment and circumstantial conditions accordingly may sometimes prove important, or even necessary, for progress in practice. For example, the practitioner is responding to a situation of social deprivation when he lives in seclusion, and to that of social overstimulation when he lives with others – or to a situation of somatic normalcy when he lives in temperate and comfortable physical environments, but one of somatic over-stimulation (pain) in extreme weather or in uncomfortable physical environments. The manner by which the social and physical environments condition and pressure mind and body in each case differs considerably, and so does the reactionary exercise of a corresponding effort.

Thus one of the most important foundations of *pañña* or transcendental self-awareness and wisdom is to learn how the mind functions in relation to the requirements of practice *itself*, and particularly the exercise of effort. The general rule is that sustaining the *iddhipādā* or effective motivation in the pursuit of any long-term goal will prove seriously challenging, and this explains the great emphasis which Buddhist psychology places on being able to understand the experience of practice itself, and to learn how to enjoy it and find solace and contentment in it *as a process of self-transformation*, rather than as a deaf and mute tool or means employed to reach a goal. Thus the more the practitioner advances along the path and develops maturity in understanding it, the less the "purpose" of his practice remains nibbāna or

final deliverance itself, but rather becomes increasingly something that very closely resembles the banana for the chimp and the gratification in the reach of which becomes equally proximate and immediate! It is directly in front of you, already visible, recognisable, calling you to it: the very next step which will take you closer to your final goal, but not yet the final goal itself. For just as the chimp advances toward the banana by using at first a chair, and then a stick with which to catch it, so also progresses the practitioner toward final emancipation by developing and acquiring enabling *psychological means* at first. The difference being that these acquired psychological means constitute in themselves partial spiritual achievements that are both psychologically blissful and cosmologically significant.

For it is exceedingly difficult to pursue with any long-term goal if the lengthy path toward achieving it was devoid of pleasure. Finding solace and joy in the path of practice itself, which the Buddha emphasises,⁴¹ becomes the only means by which the effort of traversing it can at all be sustained, and the journey across the high mountain pass feels markedly different for the hiker who enjoys the sport of his body and appreciates the spectacular scenery, than it does for his servant who hikes with him for no reason other than to carry provisions on his shoulders! Thus, one of the most important factors which make effort not only pleasurable, but at all possible, rather than painful and defeating, is the gratifying outcome of its own exercise. This is how the training of animals in performing complex tasks that are unnatural to their minds, say in a circus or in the military, becomes at all possible, where food or other gratifiers are used as a stimulating reward for every successful step they take in learning the complex performance, rather than only at its completion. And should you place a thousand obstacle between the chimp and the banana, and offer no partial rewards in between, he might persist with the task for a time, but will sooner or later give up on the quest and even if his desire for the banana does not abate or even intensifies.

Finally, we have seen how even with wisdom and faith present and abundant, effort is still needed to actually realise a certain result or reach a certain goal, and we have by now developed a good idea about how effort naturally works, and how its expenditure is generally limited and regulated

⁴¹ See for example *Mahādhammasamādāna-sutta* (MN 46).

by nature. We have also seen how it is not possible for any living organism, including human, to operate independently from the evolutionary mechanisms of nature, say through the independent exercise of some rational freewill, and thus we could only exercise our effort in ways that are fundamentally identical to that of the simplest organisms. That which distinguishes our exercise of effort from the *mimosa-pudica* or sensitive plant for example, which folds and droops its leafs away from the touch of a solid object but spreads and exposes them to that of sunlight, is that instead of taking the form of autonomic motor reactions to positive and negative tactile contacts, our situation is that of self-conscious reactions of the *attention and memory*, to positive and negative *mental contacts*. However the fundamentally *reactionary* nature of the right exercise of effort is identical in both plant and human, and it is characterised equally by the same twofold mechanism of *saṃvara* and *bhāvanā*, that is, withdrawal and shrinking away from the harmful, and expanding and spreading through the nourishing.

I conclude this book and wonderful journey of exploration by discussing the variables and conditions required for the right and optimal exercise of these two fundamental mechanisms of effort, and by demonstrating their efficacy and central place in Buddhist practice, and how they can be developed to such perfection where, "being in the present moment", reaches its ultimate point of consummation precisely as their exercise for the sake of reaching one's ultimate transcendental goal of emancipation, becomes for the individual practitioner as much immediate, consistent, and spontaneous, as their natural exercise by the plant!

6.4 Singleness of mind (Citta-Bhāvanā)

I wish to remind once more at this point that the word "effort" in Buddhist psychology refers precisely to nothing other than the conscious exercise or application of the *attention*, and that, alongside understanding and heeding the natural limitations of one's capacities of effort, the further development and augmentation of the reach and sharpness, and even speed (or absorption) of such attentional exercise, are one of the most significant aspects of Buddhist practice. Such development of effort was one of the things to which the renowned pioneer of psychology William James paid great attention, and to the significance of which he exhibited a remarkable level of understanding:

"Whether the attention come by grace of genius or by dint of will, the longer one does attend to a topic the more mastery of it one has. And the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is compos sui [=master of himself] if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about." —William James (The Principles of Psychology, 1890).

The trouble however with James's investigation of this matter is that he restricted his analysis of motivation and effort in the confines of circumstantial situations or events, rather than as functions which develop and transform gradually in the course of one's entire life, and across manifold situations. This prevented him from being able to see what ancient Indian meditators saw and experienced: While it is indeed the case that a "recurrent attention" is the foundation of a "sustained attention", neither happen by means of sustaining any "strain of effort", but rather by a process of gradually increasing withdrawal and dispassion with regard to *other mental functions* which stimulate the attention and distract it away from its object, while at the same time gradually *habituating* the attention by means of self-awareness and memory to incline to the object or goal with increasing spontaneity and effortlessness. When the concept of *voluntary* manipulation of the attention is abandoned, and the factors and variables of its conditional arousal discerned, along with the gradual process of their possible transformation and development, it finally becomes possible to discover how

to conduct such mental "education, nurturing, development, or habituation", all of which are words which perfectly match the Pāli "*bhāvanā*".

Citta or *singleness of mind and purpose* is the centre around which revolves the success of any long term pursuit and attainment of a complex goal. But in order for it to function in relation to such a long-term complex goal, it must at first be developed as a *general capacity* of the mind. We have seen how, unlike the *tropism* of a plant which spontaneously causes it to expose and spread its leaves to the touch of sunlight, a human pursuing an unnatural goal must *acquire* the wisdom and knowledge as to how to expose and spread the attention in the sphere of the useful and nourishing for the sake of reaching that goal, and then must train and habituate the mind to exercise its attention and sustain it in this unnatural pursuit precisely against the constant gravitation of nature. When developed, singleness-of-mind is precisely the force which enables the practitioner to keep at a certain specific task at a time and until it is done, and despite of the presence of amble other tasks or distractions continuously calling for one's attention simultaneously. It is the foundation upon which develops such positive qualities as zeal, effort, and focus, as opposed to laziness, procrastination, and distraction.

It is very important to note that singleness of mind and purpose is a quality that can be developed, even at a very young age, and is therefore often emphasised by many developmental psychologists and educators. Its development occurs by habituating the mind to maintain its attention with a single task until it is done, and to not leave it unfinished. And in the case of long term tasks, such as writing a book or making a work of art or raising a child; one is to attend to other concomitant tasks of life without losing sight of their long term goal and the cumulative requirements of its completion in terms of regular time and effort. Thus individuals who are endowed with such singleness-of-mind tend to keep a constant eye on the gradual progress that they are making in the course of time, and whether or not it is bringing them any closer to a point in the foreseeable future when the book or work of art will have become finished, or when the child will have turned into an independent adult who is both gentle and resilient, self-confident and compassionate, and humble and wise!

Alongside the practice of mental calm and formal meditation, which generally results in the expansion of the attention-span; the other main

method used to develop the general capacity of singleness of mind and purpose, is to "*be in the present moment!*" What exactly does that mean and how exactly it is done, is far from being a mystery, and all that it takes to embark on this supreme practice is simply to regard every activity in everyday life, including simply picking one's nose, as a mini-task that is to be done with attention and care until it is finished, and whether or not it is easy or enjoyable. This allows practitioners to readily discern the purpose in everything that they are doing, and to seek to establish that purpose in everything that they catch themselves already doing!

The striking difference between doing things mindlessly or with awareness and purpose can be seen very clearly for example in the behaviour of children at a playground, with some exhibiting a clear awareness of how this moment of playing is one for pleasure and which has pleasure as its purpose, and who therefore become more intent on the activity of playing and more absorbed in it, while other children exhibit an erratic or absent attention and motivation with regard to the activity and opportunity of playing, as such does not present itself to their consciousness as a specific and unique event of the day, but rather one which so happens to have imperceptibly followed from whatever that was taking place before it. In such cases where attention and self-awareness comes to one only after an activity or behaviour has been already on-going spontaneously and without a conscious sense of purpose; one is to pose for a moment and relax in this very moment of advent of self-awareness, possibly by noticing the breath, and then restart the same activity all over again from beginning to end, or resume it from where it was posed, yet now with full awareness of its purpose, and even if that purpose was frivolous or silly, or nothing more than the casual pleasure inherent in the activity itself, as in catching oneself singing or whistling for example. The most remarkable thing about this training is that, should one catches oneself indulging unconsciously in an undesirable activity or behaviour that should otherwise be restrained, the moment one attempts to redo or resume it purposefully and consciously, the moment one fails, and the behaviour immediately stops without any effort or exertion of a painful restraint!

The most crucial aspect in this training of mind, especially in young people, is to suppress the development of such habitual responses as impulsivity, aversion, and impatience, when it comes to tasks which require

more effort and perseverance, and that is why it is essential to apply a child or even one's own self to such tasks as realistically *doable and achievable*, as those which variables are within the scope of one's capacities or skills, rather than to tasks that are impossible and defeating, and which variables are beyond one's control or influence. It is precisely the repeated experience of such doable tasks that habituates the mind in perseverance, while exceedingly difficult or impossible tasks, if repeated, habituate the mind instead in giving up more easily, eventually even in tasks that are doable. This is indeed compatible with the exercise of effort in most spiritual or transcendental doctrines, where it is not the world, but rather one's own heart, that is to be cleaned and purified of self-obsession, greed, hatred, cruelty, and violence; as the variables of the world, and which make it hopelessly and perpetually unclean, remain ever beyond the reach of any individual.

As we have seen, nature does not find any hedonic or emotional reward in the expenditure of high-quality attention and effort over simple and non-stimulating tasks, and the persistent difficulty in applying the practice of singleness of mind and purpose with any degree of consistency comes precisely from the cost of maintaining self-awareness and conscious attention over tasks that can otherwise be done subconsciously or in a perfunctory manner. It is precisely the resistance which nature puts to such '*wasteful*' expenditure of attention that makes the exercise of singleness-of-mind so difficult to maintain indefinitely. The natural design of evolution is for all such simple tasks to be done with an automatic unconscious fashion, with nothing but external sensorial information alone guiding forth the functioning of the attention in completing the task. In a scale from zero to ten, the effective application of the attention in operating a sophisticated machinery, or solving a complex calculus, or drawing an engineering plan, requires just as much effort as the self-conscious and careful application of the attention over a very simple task as sweeping, sewing, or washing dishes: the full ten. However, and since such simple tasks can also be done with an automatic unconscious attention that will require no more than a tiny fraction of effort to accomplish, nature suppresses and punishes any such conscious exercise of high-quality attention on these simple tasks, and that's precisely why we find it difficult to do them with conscious attention!

Such punishment of nature manifests precisely through *vibhava-tanhā*, for example in how most people usually *dislike* daily chores or domestic duties; that is, they never find them *naturally stimulating*. Most of us would rather apply our *bhava-rāga* or stimulation-hungry minds pursuing some other more complex or challenging activity, because it is in attending to a more complex task that nature allows for the expenditure of a higher quality of attention and effort, and that's precisely why most people would rather spend their time playing games or socialising, rather than tidying rooms and arranging desks; because it is the earlier type of activities that most people find *naturally stimulating*, while the latter, *naturally boring*. Thus, whether an activity is naturally stimulating or not depends entirely on its complexity and the extent by which it is challenging to one's capacities of attention, and that's why children are more easily *excitable* than adults, simply because a new experience or task is always more challenging than one in relation to which the mind has grown completely normalised; and should you expose a grown man to a really new and fresh such experience or challenge, you may well find him as much excited about it as his toddler child, if not even more! This is precisely how when we do finally embark on any such menial task or job that does not sufficiently challenge or stimulate the attention, as in simple domestic chores or standing in an assembly line – we immediately feel uncomfortable, restless, and bored, and seek to compensate for the condition of under-stimulation by stimulating ourselves further while we are at it, usually by becoming all playful and musical: whistling, singing, using objects and tools in an acrobatic fashion, and many other such playful behaviours. And just as is the case with being locked in a dark cell with no sensorial stimulation, if we did not stimulate ourselves while doing a simple task, the imagination takes over and the mind plunges in *papañca* or excessive pointless ideation and wandering.

As we have seen in our examination of *samādhi* or mental calm, ancient Indian meditators made one of the most important discoveries of the mind: that if you could maintain for a long-enough span of time an attitude of disinterest and dispassion with regard to both the desire for self-stimulation and the restless and wandering ideation which arises as a result of under-stimulation, attention begins to form and become collected on its own accord, desire for self-stimulation, restlessness, and boredom, all vanish spontaneously, and the free and agile attention begins to function in relation

to the simple object or task just as if it was a complex one, that is, it becomes effortlessly bent on it and absorbed in the experiencing of its manifestations and variables. This was the great discovery of how to apply the full conscious attention to such simple tasks that are precisely *not naturally stimulating*. Ancient Indian meditators made the further important discovery of how such meditative absorbed and conscious attention is not only immediately and vividly rewarding and pleasurable, but also entirely free of the slightest symptoms of excitement, friction, or agitation, which is precisely what Mihaly Csikszentmihályi termed as "*flow*", and which is basically the equivalent of *jhāna* or meditative absorption in the situation of normal awareness, and which is precisely what *citta* or singleness-of-mind is. What this means in psychological terms, is a great thing! It means that it is not the qualities of experience or object of attention that generates the pleasure, but rather it is the mere successful exercise of attention to an extent of absorption, irrespective of the variables and features of the object of attention. This immediately explains how we sometimes find great sense of pleasure, contentment, and general wellbeing, when we occasionally find ourselves spontaneously absorbed in the exact same domestic chores or menial tasks that otherwise usually cause us distress and boredom.

There is thus this very unique kind of pleasure or bliss in the increasing development or nurturing or habituation of the mind in the conscious exercise of attention and singleness of mind and purpose; the bliss of "being in the present moment". This is highly important, because it means that attentional states "feel something"! They are not just functional states of which we can become abstractly aware, rather we can discern their very presence and functioning by sensing the way they *feel*, and just as we use the pleasure associated with the sensation of the breath to sustain attention with the breath in formal meditation, in normal states of awareness we can capitalise on such pleasure of the exercise of conscious attention and singleness-of-mind to manage to abide in it *longer*, and to experience its arousal with increasing frequency; simply, to miss it and to yearn for it. This is the case especially given that *papañca* or wandering ideation feels something also; the problem with wandering is that it comes to us as a relief-response to under-stimulation, just as a pain-killer that removes a headache, and that's why it is extremely persistent and addictive; thus the *malaise* that is associated with it cannot readily be discerned, *until*, one has finally

experienced the pleasure and bliss of mental calm and singleness-of-mind; only then does one have something else to which he can compare the feeling of wandering ideation, and to witness in experience how it is bound with restlessness and with a distinct foul and rotten feeling, and what bright and healthy feeling comes to replace it when the attention shifts into a conscious, collected, and sustained mode.

Such distinction in the feeling of singleness-of-mind and that of obsessive ideation sheds important light on the difference between singleness-of-mind and *hyper-focus*, the latter being predominantly a negative state of mind, and which is frequently confused with the practice of *citta-bhāvanā*. It has become customary for some practitioners to attempt to develop singleness-of-mind by monitoring the details of their bodily movements, as in walking meditation for example, or by doing everyday tasks and chores very slowly and in a robotic manner in an attempt to sustain the attention and awareness to such an extent so that every aspect of bodily and sensorial activity is consciously registered and observed as it unfolds in real time. However such over-focusing with minute and insignificant details of experience almost always clouds awareness, distresses the flow of attention, and impairs intuitive discernment, as such over-focus burdens the attention and cognition with an overflow of sensorial information surpassing that which they can naturally process in any given moment, while blocking at the same time perception and processing of other sensorial information that may be necessary for the cognitive generation of a balanced holistic mapping of the environment. Studies in sports psychology for example, have shown that the practice of *quite-eye* or focal visual attention in certain sports, though may improve aiming, yet can also negatively affect cognition of other sensorial information, including spatial ones; other similar forms of cognitive manipulation were shown to worsen the overall muscular spontaneity and reactionary performance of the body.⁴² We can see this condition clearly in babies who are literally taking their first steps learning how to walk, and how they usually perform better when they attempt to walk intuitively rather than through caution and calculation, and how the thing that makes them trample and fall after having successfully

⁴² This is sometimes referred to as "constrained-action hypothesis". See for example: Wulf, Gabriele, et al. (2001). *The automaticity of complex motor skill learning as a function of attentional focus*. The Quarterly journal of experimental psychology. 54A (4), pp. 1143–1154.

walked several steps, is nothing other than reverting from a spontaneous and intuitive mode of attention and effort to a calculative one that seeks to grasp the details of experience and how it is happening, so as to mentally control its arousal and progress in the future.

Such disharmonious and jerky condition of the attention contrasts sharply with its fluent and easy *flow* through its exercise in a spontaneous and intuitive manner, where no effort is made to attend to any more sensorial information than what is strictly and naturally already experienced; a contrast which expresses itself further in how the feeling of *pīti* or sense of pleasure or bliss is absent in the first case and constant in the second. Once such hyper-focused attention is aroused, *nāmarūpa* or the holistic natural balance and harmony between body and mind become disrupted, and the awareness becomes immediately removed from its natural element, which readily explains why such artificial hyper-focused attention is unknown in animals. The exact same situation of disharmony manifests on the behavioural level when the natural flow or spontaneity of *emotional expression* is being repressed by unnecessary or excessive exercise of behavioural restraint; a situation which likewise leads to a disrupted and jerky cognitive and behavioural functions which otherwise work fluently and easily if left to nature without behavioural interference. It is thus of great importance to note that a positive motivational state can be seriously hampered or negatively affected by the wrong exercise of effort.



Figure 14: The slightly open eyes gazing downwards, revealing the pleasurable intuitive attentiveness of singleness-of-mind; rendering the awareness flexible and malleable, agile, openly receptive to the external & clearly comprehending of its impact on the internal and mental. "Flow", "mindfulness", "here-and-now", and myriad other expressions have been utilised with limited success to grasp the subtle essence of this experience!

"Let my motivation, effort, singleness-of-mind, and examination, be neither too lax nor too intense, neither over-focused on the internal nor dispersed all over the external." "Iti me chando, [virīya, citta, vīmaṇsā], na ca atilīno bhavissati, na ca atippaggahito bhavissati, na ca ajjhataṇṇa sankhito bhavissati, na ca bahiddhā vikkhito bhavissati." – *Vibhaṅga-sutta* (SN 51.20).

This reminds us again of William James, to whom "the feeling of effort" was always one of heaviness and friction. The fact that there is also a pleasurable and even blissful feeling of effort is one of the most significant discoveries of ancient Indian psychology, and it is one of the most important elements of experience that practitioners can depend on in order to learn how to develop, nurture, and augment singleness of mind and purpose, and how to habituate the mind in its exercise vis-à-vis *bhava*, that is, in response to sensorial, emotional, and cognitive stimulation, up to a point where its functioning becomes as much immediate, spontaneous, and effortless, as the *mimosa-pudica* effortlessly and instantly spreads its leaf upon the touch of sunlight. This perhaps represents a psychological Buddhist explanation of the ancient Greek *ataraxia*, a concept of the exercise of reactionary effort that is based on the sound understanding of nature and of the manners of its workings, so that one can regulate one's responses to their impact and pressure without the slightest friction or conflict.

Such close relationship between high-quality attentiveness and pleasure further explains the generally spiritual and particularly Buddhist and Cynic emphasis on the importance of frugality and deprivation with regard to gross forms of sensorial pleasures, in that living in a deprived state necessarily and naturally results in a sharper attention that seeks to extract as much pleasure out of the little that is offered as possible. It is in this fashion that the pleasure experienced by a deprived or renunciate person in very simple and non-stimulating experiences, such as drinking hot tea or feeling the touch of sun in the winter or wind in the summer, is qualitatively superior to that experienced by a mundane person in very highly stimulating experiences, and not due to anything that is inherent in the object of experience, but rather due to the higher level and intensity of attention that is being exercised by the deprived person, and which is necessarily required in order for any simple experience to *become* pleasurable. At the same time, the perpetual intake of sensorial pleasures, as Taoism says, only numbs the sensitivity of the corresponding senses and the overall attention of the mind.

Picture the vast contrast between the immediate and sharp aversion of a person upon sipping from a cup of tepid tea that he ordered in some fancy restaurant, and the immense and profound sense of wellbeing that the same cup of tepid tea offers to the same person as he swallows it whole in one shot after having been stranded without food or drink in some scorching desert.

Indeed it is nothing other than the condition of physiological comfort or homeostasis, or lack thereof, that conditions the quality and intensity of the attention in response to the exact same experience in both cases, rendering it shallow and reactionary in the case of comfort, and extremely focused and goal-oriented in the case of deprivation, to the extent of bringing to full and vivid conscious awareness such subtle physiological ramifications of the intake of sugar and nourishment in the body that normally goes totally unnoticed in comfortable circumstances. Pleasure and the sense of wellbeing here, though based purely on a bodily situation, yet are in fact *indistinguishable* from the attentional situation and are not independent from it in the slightest. And what is further interesting is that the same applies when the situation of aversion and pleasure is non-bodily and is purely cognitive: Picture now the vast contrast between the contentment and enthusiasm with which poor and deprived children relate to a simple and cheap toy offered to them by aid workers, and to which they develop the strongest attachment and with which they continue to play for a long time, and the short-lived interest, or even immediate boredom and dissatisfaction with which a well-off child relates to a most fancy toy he's been offered by his loving parents, as he soon leaves it behind in the stack of the many other high-quality toys. Here too, it is the condition of deprivation that brings the attention of the poor child to *seek and find* every last possibility of pleasure and self-stimulation out of the most simple objects and playthings, and it is precisely the condition of comfort or plenty that gets nature to suppress and *numb* the attention from seeking any further stimulation in any object or experience.

This readily explains the higher level of contentment and joy among poorer people, and prevalence of resentment and suicide in more developed societies. Common wisdom has it that people suffer because of poverty; but Buddhist psychology and understanding of motivation and effort reveal how people suffer mostly due to the nature of their *responses* to any experience, irrespective of its nature and features, and further, that pleasure, joy, and contentment, arise necessarily and naturally in such situations to which the individual responds with self-awareness and singleness-of-mind, and it only so happens that individuals are more likely to develop such sense of purpose and attention in response to hardships rather than comforts, or when nothing exists in the environment to stimulate their sense of mission or

urgency. Deprivation thus is a stimulant of the exercise of effort, and the exercise of effort is a stimulant of joy – while the absence of deprivation or its replacement with comfort and plenty, is sedative and suppressive of the exercise of effort, and that in turn elicits depression and is itself a condition of depression.

This offers a lot of advice on the choice of the object chosen by one for the practice of meditation and mental calm: The object must simply be such that facilitates the arousal of conscious attention and thereby succeeds in generating pleasure, for without such pleasure, it is probably impossible to persevere in the practice of meditation long. No one could ever know what this object *should* be, as the case differs according to the temperament and karma of each individual practitioner. Again, there is nothing *inherently* pleasurable in a bodily object such as the breath or an ideational/emotional object such as *metta* or "goodwill", and the only reason one should choose one and avoid another is that experience demonstrates how one succeeds in eliciting pleasure while the other doesn't or does to a lesser extent – and indeed it may be surprising for some to learn that the thorough series of *paṭikkūlamānasikāra* and *sīvathikāmanasikāra* meditation on the most unclean objects of the living and decomposing dead body are sometimes, and not infrequently, the most successful kind of objects to elicit precisely renunciate contentment and pleasure in certain types of practitioners, thereby reinforcing their exercise of attention which directly supports their general capacity of singleness of mind and purpose. Having said that, a word must be said here on the exceptional (and highly mysterious) status of the *breath*, and its tight connection with the right exercise of effort in both flourishing and restraint. For the breath seems to function as if it was an all-encompassing fabric in which these two functions of effort manifest, and as such it indeed often changes and fluctuates spontaneously in tight connection along with the natural fluctuation of one's everyday attention and effort; a phenomenon which can be discerned through the practice of self-awareness. As such, should one learn how to *breathe responsively* and in a conscious manner in reaction to positive and negative experiences of contact, tweaking the intensity, duration and depth of the breath in ways which correspond to the stimulus and its impact; the result becomes an increasingly pleasurable exercise of effort. It is as if the breath *absorbs* all experience, leading spontaneously and without need for any cognitive

evaluations or wisdom, to restraint with regard to the negative, and attention with regard to the positive or neutral. Such tweaking and awareness of the breath in everyday life is accompanied by a constant sensation of refined and satisfying pleasure; the exact opposite of heaviness and friction.

Finally we arrive at what appears to me to be the most powerful use of singleness-of-mind; its application on *negative* mental states, and whereby the energy inherent in these states, which could indeed be so great, becomes redirected to serve a positive mental condition. In a heightened and steady condition of self-awareness, the arousal of any negative state becomes immediately noticed. The more superior option to the practice of *restraint* in this case, is to embrace the momentum and energy of the negative state and redirect it at its own origin; the ego! The arousal of anger for example is always conditioned by an egoist identification of an external object of anger, whatever it may be. Here the practitioner whose self-awareness and mental calm continues to be sufficiently robust despite of the agitation of the energy of anger, which by now already manifests to some extent on the physiological level also, has a good chance to apply the angry of mind at the inward ego rather than the external object; that is, become angry at the ego instead of what the ego hates! Because the mind is already in an angry state, and because the practice of restraint, which we will soon explore, consumes rather than generates energy; capitalising on the already flowing energy of anger, hate, aversion, or any such negative state, can prove incredibly effective when such negative mental energy is properly channelled against the ego rather than against the world. A strong singleness-of-mind muscle is precisely what allows for such channelling and redirecting of negative mental energy.

The remarkable thing is that this practice does not lead to the reinforcement of these negative mental states; for as we have seen, the moment one consciously embarks on hating the ego or indulging in anger with regard to it, the moment those very negative feelings and states of mind actually stop. What this practice results into is not only the transcendence of negative mental states, but also the reinforcement of estrangement and alienation with regard to the ego, and the reinforcement also of dispassion and calm in the face of its emotional and ideational momentum. But because one cannot reuse every negative mental state in the same way, as for example in becoming 'lustful' or 'jealous' toward the ego, one here continues this

practice by shifting these negative states to something which approximates their nature, or by transforming them into a general state of *antagonism* toward the ego. What the practitioner depends on here is that his awakened faith, self-awareness, and active memory, prevent him from being able to identify with the impulses of the ego any longer, and as such it becomes *possible* to transform a state of lust or fear toward an external object, for example, into revulsion, antagonism, and estrangement toward the ego. Such transformation of negative impulses from one state to another, and away from the external and toward the ego –juggling them as it were– begins to happen with increasing spontaneity and immediacy as one progresses in the general practice of singleness-of-mind in the course of time.

All of these observations point to the importance of being able to discern with increasing sensitivity and proficiency how right effort *feels*, because it is precisely through knowing such feeling that the mind can be *habituated* in exercising such right effort with increasingly fluency and spontaneity. Without knowing this feeling and growing increasingly familiar with it, the right exercise of effort remains based on an arrested and jerky attention that keeps resorting to thought and concept in order to invest itself in the right exercise of effort, just like the baby that, having taken few steps with his developing leg-muscles, eventually falls. The arrival at a condition where the right exercise of effort becomes sufficiently spontaneous and fluent perhaps bears much similarity to the prominent Zen concept or experience of "*satori*", and also marks the mental dimension of *sotāpatti* or first stage of cosmological deliverance from a different angle: the irreversible emancipation of the consciousness from the clutches of natural conditioning and conditionality through mere *attentional deliverance*.

Here, attention itself begins to transform into an unnatural mode, becoming increasingly stable, collected, effortlessly balancing the perception of the external with the discernment of its impact on the inward, and capable of maintaining its focus and agility in such manner over longer spans of time. This eventually results in a final break from nature in terms of emotional or hedonic markings, that is, the ego loses its capacity to register and store events and experiences in the memory as either pleasurable or painful, and thereby the regeneration of certain fundamental natural impulses, such as fear and lust, may finally cease at this point. Indeed it seems that the mere exercise of the attention in this transcendental fashion, even in mundane and

menial activities, necessarily results in such clarity, alertness, agility, and sharpness of mind that forces the awareness to transcend even the most subtle and profound phenomena, revealing "in the present moment" their own conditionality and the conditioned responses they elicit in the human psyche. A powerful and fluent attention of that sort, also, couldn't possibly allow for the forgetfulness of the fundamental situation of conditionality and of the paramount quest of deliverance therefrom, and as such it perhaps constitutes an *attentional dimension* of the condition of *sotāpatti* or irreversible gnosis.

6.5 Restraint (Sanyvara)

As mentioned earlier, the practitioner immediately and spontaneously *knows* what is a harmful or a nourishing mental contact, but because his quest is transcendental and unnatural, he doesn't naturally or readily know how to respond to them, unlike the oblivious sensitive plant! Though his goal and his practice are wholly divorced from nature and continually leading to withdrawal from it, his spontaneous responses continue to come from nature; a situation which only results in the wrong or ineffective exercise of effort. We see the impact of this situation in how many devoted practitioners often become excessively worried about two particular outcomes: inappropriate thoughts, emotions, and behaviours; and forgetting about the ennobling truths and the practice! The first fear is justified by the fact that "bad" thoughts and emotions continue to assail practitioners inwardly, sometimes intensely, and out of these actual bad behaviours sometimes unfold spontaneously, and if not in public, then at least when they are alone in private. The second fear is justified by the fact that practitioners do experience episodes of reverting back to normalcy and to mundane habits, accompanied by forgetfulness of the transcendental path to which they are devoted, and some of these episodes of oblivion could be surprisingly lengthy in duration and thorough in effect.

Similar versions of these two prominent fears can be found in many complex and long-term pursuits, and they generally stand as a testimony of the seriousness and sincerity of the practitioner. However neither of these fears is necessary or helpful, as they only reinforce the ego and the desire to control experience, and retard the process of understanding motivation and effort as *anatta*, that is, impersonal processes of nature. We have seen how total forgetfulness of a cherished goal is impossible in principle, unless one becomes incapacitated and gives up on the motivation to pursue it, or develops faith in yet another higher goal. Otherwise the memory of it tends to increase in the course of time, and as we have seen, it eventually becomes nearly constant and stable, impressing itself over the awareness and influencing the manner by which the mind views and understands everything it experiences, even as the power of nature and habit continue to claim the attention regularly and frequently, and succeed in dragging it away from this cherished goal.

As to the worry regarding negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, which is generally very widespread particularly in the practice of spiritual striving, and which sometimes exercises a crippling effect on the progress of practitioners; it is important to realise that punishment or suppression of a "bad" experience or behaviour may be counter-productive to the goal of transcending it, as failure in preventing it, or feeling guilty that any "negative" experiences are at all arising, renders the practice of self-awareness *itself* a negative one, that is, one that is always *followed* by punishment or self-contempt, and deprives the practitioner from the opportunity of feeling good about the very capacity and advent of self-awareness. As self-awareness becomes thus a painful experience, shrouded with guilt and shame, the ego puts up greater resistance to it and as a result its fluency and vigour as a mental function or force decreases. This is also how "depression" is prevalent among renunciate practitioners who practice behavioural suppression, as the very *possibility* of wrongdoing, let alone the wrongdoing itself, becomes a constant painful imaginative stimulus, and the mere dwelling on its moral or social ramifications becomes itself an already established and on-going source of "pain" to which nature responds with depression, in an attempt, and usually a successful one, to get the practitioner away from it.

If each time you catch yourself thinking about something negative, or indulging in a negative emotion, you respond by feeling bad about yourself, this does not necessarily result in the reduction of these negative thoughts or feelings, but results certainly rather in the reduction of the tendency to become aware of them again in the future, and inwardly aversive to the conditions or circumstances which compel you to be thus judgemental of yourself. On the other hand, if each time instead you celebrated the fact that you have at least become aware of negative states, even if this mere awareness did not prohibit their arousal, and cognitively recognised that such awareness is a good event in itself, despite of it being an awareness of bad things; then not only is the tendency for further awareness increases, but strangely, the associated bad memories or thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, may very likely lose their stimulating effect as you celebrate just having become aware of them. Thus, it is of far greater benefit when the practitioner, instead of making an effort of restraint, to make an effort instead of alienation and estrangement with regard to both the negative

experience and the one seeking to restrain it! This is so because a successful suppression of negativity, on the other hand, conditions the psyche to identify with the 'suppressor' of experience and to take possession of and identify with the behavioural victory; all of which only bolsters the ego and maintains confusion regarding the natural conditionality of motivation and effort, which further does not ensure any further or final transcendence of those negative states in the first place, let alone their mental roots.

Though many argue for the case of restraint⁴³ on the basis of how the propagation of a certain negative mental state enhances the mental foundations and habits which give rise to it, the truth is that this is the case only in the situation where these negative states unfold *unconsciously*, without self-awareness, or with the *bad* type of awareness, say through hedonic and emotional indulgence or self-identification with them. For we have already seen how an alienated and dispassionate awareness of both the negative experience and the doer of it, *gradually* leads to the transcendence of the emotional and cognitive foundations of the experience rather than the mere suppression of its behavioural manifestations. Such *digging up* of the mental roots which support behaviours is precisely the purpose of Buddhist practice,⁴⁴ and any behavioural suppression that does not descend below the behavioural features of experience and into its emotional and cognitive foundations, appear clearly to be insufficient and futile, if not even counter-productive, in that there is no evidence whatsoever that such restraint, even when extended over years and decades, succeeds in reducing the recurrence of conditioned hedonic and emotional reactions to environmental stimuli, or the cognitive self-identification with the experiencer of it. Evidence rather suggests the opposite: that restraint without self-awareness may substantiate

⁴³ "Restraint" throughout this chapter is used as an equivalent also of "discipline".

⁴⁴ The Pāli text shows the Buddha describing the host of negative mental qualities and fundamental conditions of mental existence which sustain the consciousness and bring about its transmigration, as phenomena that ought to be "given up, destroyed at their foundations, uprooted like a palm tree, disconnected from their existential supports, with no possibility of further thriving."

[ponobhaviko jātisaṅsāro / kāmarāgānusayo, Paṭighānusayo, diṭṭhānusayo, vicikicchānusayo, mānānusayo, bhavarāgānusayo, avijjānusayo / rāgo, doso, moho] – "...***pahīno ucchinnamūlo tālavatthukato anabhāvaṅkato āyatīṇ anuppādadhammo.***" See *Dutiyaacetovimutti-phala-sutta* (AN 5.72), *Dutiyaanusaya-sutta* (AN 7.12), *Ājīvaka-sutta* (AN 3.72).

the emotive and hedonic impact of the stimulus, and may actually intensify craving or aversion with regard to it.

Now is there any benefit of restraint *alongside* self-awareness? The answer is a definite "yes", but only on the circumstantial level! On the psychological level, the answer proves rather to be "no"! Just as the case with the exercise of willpower, an outburst of behavioural restraint can prove exceedingly useful in response to the right kind of situations, and with consequences that far exceed in their practical utility what one could imagine, starting from saving a day from being hopelessly lost to lethargy and laziness, all the way to saving others from one's own possible cruelty and violence. Thus the good outcome of such exercise of self-restraint is the prevention of a negative circumstantial situation, with the only positive psychological outcome being that such exercise may also give great confidence to the practitioner in the efficacy and successful impact of his self-awareness. But even that should be taken with a grain of salt, for on the psychological level, and even with self-awareness present, restraint does not contribute to the decreasing of the hedonic or emotional power of stimuli, but only emboldens the ego by reinforcing its habit to control experience and to indulge in such control. By preventing a negative state from happening, restraint mostly deprives the awareness from yet another chance of exercising itself further in the observation of *raw hedonic and emotional sensations*, be they pleasurable or painful, benevolent or hurtful, and such could be a greater loss psychologically, when compared to the circumstantial gain of avoiding a negative circumstantial situation or outcome! And indeed, there are many examples around us where *letting the negative happen* sometimes functions as the only way by which people finally come to see a certain truth or learn an important lesson, and not infrequently, it is the advent of heart-disease or liver-cancer that succeeds in finally breaking the hedonic and emotional addiction to smoking or drinking, or the committing of a serious crime that gets the perpetrator to finally and for the first time taste of the magic of conscience and power of guilt, and so on. We have already seen how such excessive behaviours and addictions are incompatible with the slightest self-awareness in the first place, nevertheless even for a sufficiently self-aware practitioner, saving oneself or others from a negative circumstantial event is what makes the exercise of behavioural restraint

worthwhile, but not any other reason that has to do with the psychological progress or development of the practitioner himself.

This is very important to realise particularly in such contexts where the *appearance* of practitioners becomes sometimes prioritised over their actual inward development. And contrary to the popular view that the Buddhist monk is possessed of the highest power of self-restraint, the ultimate destination to which we ought to be increasingly headed as Buddhist practitioners is rather that of the total release of spontaneous action, accompanied by a continually sustained self-awareness. Once this equation is established, salvation becomes only a matter of time, and regardless of the nature and quality of one's circumstantial behaviour! For as we have seen, self-awareness *alone* functions as a safety-valve that blocks passionate and dangerous behaviour on the one hand, and reinforces the awakening of the conscience on the other; and it is a misunderstanding to think that what the Buddha meant by living mindfully and doing things mindfully is to exercise control over thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, but rather control is needed continually over the *awareness* of such. Thus it is not a practitioner who is full of restraint that exhibits progress in practice, but rather the opposite, one who is full of spontaneity! And the purity and nobility of conduct which social culture celebrates in the ideal Buddhist monk, is worthless if it comes solely from a temporal and forceful suppression of inward negativity. Rather a genuine and authentic such purity and nobility of conduct arise *despite of the total spontaneity and release of action*, without any attempt of controlling or manipulating outward behaviour with thought and effort. Only then can we say that the idealness of such practitioner is coming not only from his serene and controlled appearance, but further also from his inward incomparable freedom and bliss of *nirodha* and deliverance.

But since self-awareness wavers, comes and goes, sleeps and awakens in the course of one's practice to reach such ideal inward state, it is here that restraint comes to the equation as a significant factor, in that its functioning becomes necessary precisely as self-awareness goes absent. Since the negative and natural habituation and conditioning of the mind happens through unconscious experiences, the restraint of such unconscious experiences ensures that the mind is not exposed to further negative habituation or conditioning. Thus, in the situation of the absence of self-awareness, restraint prevents the propagation or reinforcement of already

established unconscious mental habits (old karma) by suppressing their corresponding manifestation in spontaneous thoughts, memories, emotions, and behaviours, and ensures that no new habituation of the mind with new karmically significant mental patterns is taking place.

Much of the skill and wisdom of the practitioner manifests in this continual interplay between restraint and self-awareness, increasing the one just by the same amount as the other founders. This explains how self-awareness is itself such mental state of which the practitioner needs to be constantly aware, that is, *self-awareness of self-awareness*, which is the only way to guide the practitioner as to how much restraint he needs to exercise proportionately in any given time. The point at which zero self-awareness is present and total restraint is needed involves a paradox and a lesson! The paradox is that a minimum degree of self-awareness is always needed for the exercise of restraint, and therefore when self-awareness goes totally absent, instead of being able to apply total restraint we rather fail at this point to apply any restraint or any effort at all, and behave impulsively and solely on the basis of our established and dominant mental habits, just like animals, and it is precisely here that karma finds its strongest chance of self-propagation and even acceleration. The lesson, and great one at that, is that there can never be any such total restraint! For such would represent a form of intended momentary death of karmic or spontaneous action, that couldn't possibly coexist with *bhava* and with the situation of being alive. It is a vivid testimony of how restraint alone couldn't possibly lend us even closer to any true deliverance, and of how every moment spent in total absence of self-awareness represents a form of spiritual death, from which we, very luckily, always awaken back to spiritual life at a later point or another.

Having understood when to resort to restraint and what is its useful impact, we can now examine how to practice and apply it. Experientially, restraint is nothing other than a certain mode of *samādhi* or mental calming, and it refers to patient endurance, or what I like to call, *freezing*, in the face of the manifold hedonic and emotive stimuli and mobilisers which will necessarily continue to arise naturally in the course of practice in various different situations and by various intensities. We have seen how nature induces a physiological transformation in the body in tight connection with hedonic and emotional stimulation, which is precisely the means by which it arouses the organism to bodily and verbal action. Having been moved in that

way, the organism has reinforced the potential hedonic and emotional effect of the stimulus to recur in similar situations; this is what karma psychologically means. To what extent are we really able to *freeze* and restrain ourselves from being moved in this or that way upon our stimulation, is something that will prove perfectly proportional to the extent by which our minds have become established in the general practice of mental calm and attentional mastery, which is precisely what enables us to grow more resilient in our withdrawal from stimulation. Indeed, at an early phase of practice there may be a need to sustain the stillness or freezing for a certain length of time until the physiological and emotional arousal or *buzz* of stimulation diminishes and fades; but at a later stage of practice a momentary outburst of such reactionary freezing in the face of stimulation succeeds with greater ease in reducing its physiological and emotional effects to naught! In both early and later stages of practice, though, one can observe the spontaneous awakening of samādhi or mental calm, and the arousal of the sensation of the breath or manifestation of the usual object of meditation may become spontaneously visible and pleasant subsequently to this experience of restraint, bringing the mind with great facility back to a condition of serenity, clarity, and stability, after having been agitated by external stimulation.

In all cases, there is always a poke or pierce of profound pain in the exercise of restraint, which some practitioners report having experienced sometimes physiologically right at the centre of the chest! One can easily argue that such piercing pain is a highly concentrated doze of depression arising as a result of saying such a direct and blatant "NO" to nature! This is why the practice of restraint is generally difficult for many practitioners, particularly to those whose tolerance to pain is generally low and particularly at the beginning of practice, where any attempt of consistent restraint usually proves to be extremely painful, and often brings about a general feeling of malaise, if not even a debilitating strain of depression. However this pain of restraint does not kill the practitioner, and in the course of time enduring it proves to be the most direct way in reducing the intensity and recurrence of hedonic and emotional stimulation. At a later stage of practice the exercise of such "NO" changes both quantitatively and qualitatively, as the general capacity of natural environmental and psychological stimuli to elicit reactionary responses from the psyche becomes less pronounced and

less frequent, and the practitioner liberates himself from their invasive power by means of an increasingly more gentle and nimble non-reactionary awareness that is no longer afflicted by the pain of its own exercise, directly, against nature. Such agile attention and awareness can with increasing ease flinch itself away from being attracted or stimulated by the most gruesome or enticing manifestations of fear or lust, be they sensorial or ideational, and nothing remains of their effect to observe aside from that increasingly faint trail of physiological arousal which they induce in the body. Such freedom affords the practitioner with incomparable sense of confidence and inner fortitude, as the very physiological manifestations of such fundamental emotions as fear and lust gradually fade away in the inward experience of the individual practitioner, and take with them that entire sphere of hedonic and emotional stimulation that dominates this entire world of life and living, fuelling it thereby with endless oblivion and suffering.

It is here that the margin of the exercise of effort will be found to be flexible, and the extent by which a practitioner is willing and able to restrain the throbbing vibration of his innermost existence in this way is determined not only by his faith and motivation, but perhaps also by karma, or the acquired qualities of his consciousness, and the depth by which their roots have dug themselves in its fabric. Yet faith and motivation play an important role in the exercise of restraint, one which we can readily discern in how people are generally more able to apply restraint in relation to such experiences which they cognitively recognise as more urgent, but not so in relation to those that are more tolerated; and a person may manage to restrain an angry impulse when the object of anger is his or her superior, but not necessarily when it is a subordinate, or when the bad behaviour will lead to social and legal troubles, but not when it will pass unpunished. This is the same process of cognitive recognition, which allows us to easily suppress certain behaviours in public that we could only with great difficulty resist doing in private. This is a general principle: the exercise of restraint is equally proportional to one's cognitive faith, motivation, and sense of purpose and urgency; a natural mental condition most commonly instinctively exploited by parents to overcome stubbornness or bring about discipline or restraint in their children: "If you don't brush your teeth, the sniffing Devourer will catch the bad scent of your mouth and will come to visit you at night in your sleep!" The poor child *believing* the scam, brushes

his teeth thoroughly and stays awake all night! In likewise manner the Buddha often used powerful similes in order to evoke in the cognition of practitioners more intense and severe evaluations of negative experiences so as to persuade them to regard them as more urgent and thereby apply more effort with regard to their restraint.⁴⁵

Thus, the exercise of restraint is not something that one can apply independently from thought and memory, without which the sense of urgency that is necessary for the exercise of restraint becomes impossible.⁴⁶ This lends us to one of the most effective ways to increase one's capacity of restraint, which is to remember more frequently and dwell longer on what's challenging and defeating in one's own inward experience rather than ignore them or seek to suppress their behavioural manifestations. This is precisely what the word "*anuppādāya*" refers to in the description of the first factor of the right exercise of effort, and which is often misunderstood as "the effort made to prevent the very arousal of dormant negative states"; a feat which, as we have seen, is both impossible and undesirable! Remembering a shortcoming in the context of how it is preventing and hampering progress to one's goal may easily render it more urgent in one's self-view, and in the course of time that alone facilitates a more far-reaching exercise of restraint with regard to it, so that it fails to propagate and reinforce itself when it finally arises. This first factor of effort then refers to the preliminary work of discerning and attending to one's shortcomings in such a way as to facilitate

⁴⁵ Examples: "From sensuality recoils, as the foot from a snake's head; the one who remembers transcends, all lust for the world." "Yo kāme parivajjeti sappasseva padā siro, So'maṇ visattikaṇ loke sato samativattati." – *Kāma-sutta* (Aṭṭhakavaggo, suttanipāta). And from the monastic code: "It would have been far better for you, fool, to put your organ into the mouth of a deadly poisonous snake than in the organ of a woman." "Varaṇ te, moghapurisa, āsivisassa ghoravisassa mukhe aṅgajātaṇ pakkhittaṇ, na tveva mātuḡāmassa aṅgajāte aṅgajātaṇ." – *Veraṇjakanda* (Pathamapārājika sikkhāpada, Vinaya Mahāvibhanga).

⁴⁶ The *Dutiyanidāna-sutta* (AN 3.112) offers a good description of such relationship between thought and motivation, for example: "Kathaṇca, bhikkhave, atīte [anāgate, paccuppanne] chandarāgaṭṭhāniye dhamme ārabba chando na jāyati? Atītānaṇ ... bhikkhave, chandarāgaṭṭhāniyānaṇ dhammānaṇ āyatiṇ vipākaṇ pajānāti. Āyatiṇ vipākaṇ viditvā tadabhinivatteti. Tadabhinivattetvā cetasā abhinivijjhivā paññāya ativijjha passati. Evaṇ kho, bhikkhave, atīte ... chandarāgaṭṭhāniye dhamme ārabba chando na jāyati."

their subsequent restraint when they finally (and necessarily) manifest in mental or behavioural experience, and instead of referring to the failure of negative states in arising altogether, "*anuppādāya*" refers rather to their failure in overwhelming the effort of self-awareness or restraint and thereby eliciting conditioned responses and preserving or enhancing their momentum and future arousal.⁴⁷

Such awareness and openness with regard to one's own persistent limitations and failures is itself a feature of the noble mind, which is indeed difficult and crushing to the psyche of most normal people. But recognising how these limitations and failures are imposed by nature rather than coming from oneself, one becomes able to look the ego directly in the eye without fearing it and without suffering from shame and self-contempt, and on the long run this indeed enhances one's effort in transcending the cognitive and emotional foundations of all these behavioural limitations and failures. The only other alternative is uncharacteristic of the ennobling path: to give in to one's limitations and abide satisfied with what one has already accomplished and nothing more, which is generally a prevalent condition among many practitioners in various fields. At some stage on the path a practitioner might finally become exhausted or worn-out, particularly due to bodily conditions that he cannot change and that may be associated with aging or permanent injury or chronic illness. The extent by which such cessation of *virīya* or effort to realise further experiences of deliverance will result in any substantial restlessness or *depression in purposelessness*, depends entirely on the extent by which the practitioner has already managed to transcend the grosser layers of conditionality and oblivion, and whether or not he is able to abide in contentment, mental calm, and estrangement with regard to the remaining layers of conditionality and suffering.

The exercise of restraint or discipline in the context of the absence of self-awareness represents the more unpleasant and painful dimension of

⁴⁷ "Bhikkhu anuppannānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ *anuppādāya* chandaṃ janeti vāyamati virīyaṃ ārabhati cittaṃ paggaṇhāti padahati." To which I venture the following translation: "A mendicant's motivation becomes aroused regarding dormant negative obstructive states, and he applies his thought and attention to them, becomes bent on them and aims at **neutralising their impact**." [as opposed to "prevent their arousal"]. —*Sammappadhāna-sutta* (AN 4.275).

practice, and for most practitioners, there will be no escape from it due to the wavering nature of self-awareness. Without it, practitioners come to learn about their shortcomings the hard way, as their unrestrained behaviour always turn against them either in the form of blame and criticism by others, or guilt and shame by themselves, both of which will always exercise a degree or another of urgency in the heart of any sincere practitioner. This reminds us of the *Vinaya*, the extensive and strict monastic disciplinary code of Buddhist mendicants, which, among many other reasons, was formulated for the purpose of "restraining such individuals as lacking shame", and whose behavioural limitations and excesses therefore do not evoke in their hearts any sense of urgency to transcend those limitations and restrain those excesses. It is such kind of individuals who need to practice the maximum possible degree of restraint, until their sense of conscience and capacities of self-awareness, very gradually, wakeup from their deep slumber.

Epilogue: Revival!

1.

We frequently encounter different kinds of "Buddhism", popular among many generations in various parts of the world, and being sometimes presented as if they were free from the cultural appropriation to which the transcendental teachings of Buddha have been subjected wherever they functioned as a *social religion* in Asian societies. Yet upon closer examination, we consistently find that these Buddhism(s) are highly appropriated too. Westerners, for example, have culturally appropriated even *their own* ancient Greek experiential doctrines, such as Cynicism and Stoicism; turning them mostly into subjects of scrutinising study and scholarship; no longer following them as *ways of life* to which an individual can become fully devoted in a religious or experiential manner. The case is exactly the same with the "serious" western Buddhism; perhaps save only for the practice of meditation, and which is being done mostly in ways similar to the practice of yoga for example. Though such practices may involve many benefits and uses, practising them without understanding or awareness of the fuller context in which they originally operate, means nothing other than that they have been culturally appropriated, and that as such their followers at least couldn't so readily regard themselves as "the authentic" Buddhists or Hindus!

But the trouble is that, for anyone to be able to go further than a shallow and out-of-context understanding of ancient Indian doctrines, and delve deep into any genuine transcendental *Dharma* as a truth or science of nature and of human psychology; we must at first develop a clear understanding regarding what this Dharma is saying clearly and exactly; a condition which is far from being present in the Buddhist case, where great ambiguity and confusion shroud even the most basic and fundamental concepts, principles, and practices! The result is the multiplicity of Buddhism(s) that we see around us everywhere, including new movements which could no longer simply call themselves "Buddhism", but must need to add a qualifying adjective to identify themselves in distinction or even opposition to other Buddhisms, as in "secular" or "socially-engaged" Buddhisms, and so forth.

The trouble however is not the emergence of new and innovative forms of Buddhist Dharma throughout the flux of human history; for that could only be expected and accepted – the trouble is rather that there is no clear understanding of any such original, authentic, or early Buddhism, to the extent that nearly every form of later Buddhism can and do claim originality and authenticity, in direct opposition and disagreement with each other, and with no result other than the perpetuation of the situation of confusion and ignorance regarding precisely the pristine and natural science and path of practice which the Buddha had discovered more than 2500 years ago.

And though it is possible or even likely that, should such ancient Greek experiential doctrines as Cynicism and Stoicism re-emerge to social prominence and occupy the station of a solid and popular social religion, we may then find many varieties of them developing in the course of time just as well; yet it will be readily seen how the extent by which anyone could transform the nature of these doctrines, or bend them to suit his own beliefs, will be rather tightly restricted and limited by the generally good condition in which these ancient Greek teachings have been preserved, specifically, in terms of the clarity of the language and manner of description with which their conceptual and experiential essence and substance is reported; a condition which differs so greatly from that of the Buddhist Pāli and Sanskrit texts. Thus, the situation that we are dealing with here is one which contrasts sharply with these ancient Greek traditions, where an already popular and thriving Buddhist transcendental doctrine is more easily appropriated, and *appropriateable* further, given the ambiguity of the text with which it is preserved and the higher -vast I'd say- margin of interpretation which its understanding allows and even requires.

Though many are those who think that everything there is to know about the Buddhist doctrine and practice has been already revealed, explained and secured, and that the present state of Dharma understanding is at most perfected or at least sufficient; the evidence and proof of the prevalence of such situation of confusion and ambiguity exist in abundance, and manifest most vividly in the *sensationalisation* of Buddhist deliverance, and which has become nearly the established condition *in the majority* of present-day Buddhist circles, including those which devote themselves to Buddhist practice! The very power, purpose, meaning, and promise of an emancipatory result or outcome of Buddhist practice, has been put into

question and undermined even by those who themselves pursue it as their goal, as the attainment of deliverance became generally regarded as a total enigma, a super magical state, the realisation of which is extremely difficult or even impossible! Cast a look on any other religion or transcendental doctrine, including even Satanism!, and you shall find that they all promise a form of deliverance or another that is *feasibly realisable and attainable* by their followers, and that will be the ultimate transcendental reward of their spiritual effort and way of life, and the conviction and faith in the reality of which becomes firm and unwavering in the hearts of those followers. And given the fact that Buddhism falls exactly in the same category as many other ancient Indian and Greek experiential doctrines which drew their power from the immediate and experiential nature of precisely the deliverance which they promised – it could only be a baffling mystery why and how it came to be that this situation of times past, came to be replaced by its exact opposite in times present, and how is it that no one became alarmed by the fact that the doctrine of the Buddha has lost its most powerful features in the understanding of many of its followers, as a truth that is: *"Readily visible, substantial and lasting, demonstrable, goal-oriented, realisable by those endowed with good sense, for themselves and by themselves"*.

The same applies to the *jhāna*, a mental experience that is strictly and clearly definable as a meditative condition of a non-stimulated attentional absorption, the acquiring and mastering of which is neither easy nor difficult, but simply a matter of practice and training, just like any other bodily or mental skill – yet we find it continually puzzled-over to the extent that it has consumed the lives of many a young practitioner, and drove some to mental frenzy and misery rather than delivered them to calm and bliss. And the same applies to the essential experience of *renunciation*, which has become reduced to the mere circumstance of celibacy or official monastic ordination and nothing more, rather than discerned as a spiritual manner of life and living that involves and engulfs one's inward psychological experience and cognitive world-view and self-view. Today there are many "practitioners" who argue *against* the thorough practice of renunciation, downplaying its significance and vitality on the basis of its circumstantial impracticality "in modern times", or proposing alternative interpretations of "what it really means" in the text. And, having now removed a foundational pillar of what supports the very essence of the Buddhist doctrine and

practice, [*merely* as I understand it!], they hold the structure by erecting in the vacant space yet another pillar of their own choosing, be it academic scholarship, or social engagement, or whatever it is that the Buddhist practitioner should now, according to them, spend his time pursuing apart from the out-dated practice of seclusion and renunciation, and whether or not these inventions find the slightest support in the text according to the principles of which they claim to abide and the originality of which they claim to have penetrated!

This is the direct result of depending on too much abstraction and ideation in the discernment of an ancient doctrine that is fundamentally experiential and practical, all of which prevents the investigator or interpreter from recognising how renunciation is predominantly a *psychological* rather than merely a circumstantial situation or practice; in the same way as the lifestyle of the ancient Greek Cynics, who lived in barrels and crevices in the streets, may indeed be no longer fitted with modern times, yet continues to contain such psychological and spiritual significance for which that very lifestyle was followed and which was its very purpose. Nor is it even true that these lifestyles are impossible to follow in the present, nor were they easier in ancient times than they would be and are today; in fact the opposite may well be the case! To lead a vagrant wandering lifestyle, live in open spaces or out in the streets, to have no social relations and no social currency, no people to ask about you, no one to protect you or vouch for your sanity or harmlessness when others grow suspicious of your odd solitary presence – all this may have exposed ancient mendicants and wanderers to much greater danger and harm than it would in contemporary times.

I do not believe, then, that leading a renunciate lifestyle *has become impossible*, but rather that it *has always been difficult*. And this recognition enables me to see that the emphasis with which the text shows the Buddha promoting a renunciate and secluded lifestyle was done *despite of its difficulty*, and not because it was easier back then than it is now. For that which makes a renunciate life difficult is not merely the environmental circumstantial constraints, but predominantly the inward psychological ones: withdrawal, abstinence, self-abnegation and deprivation; such psychological dimensions of the renunciate experience that can and should be maintained and developed *to a sufficient extent*, even as one can no

longer live in an ideal renunciate environmental circumstance, and which was the Buddha's standard *even for laypeople* who continue to be plunged in the buzz of mundane life and living yet seek deliverance with true conviction and sense of purpose.

That one is yet unable to withdraw completely from such profound inward desires and external attachments doesn't mean that one should either cease to be truly Buddhist or redefine Buddhism in such a way as to make it compatible with mundane motivations, just as failure in reaching the highest excellence in any other field doesn't mean that one should abandon it altogether or redefine it in such a way as to render its mastery rather a normality that anyone can easily accomplish. For the path is "*traversable with the least necessary effort*," and this bears witness to the genius of Buddha as an awe-inspiring and compassionate mentor and educator. Suffice it, then, to uphold renunciation as *a mental and psychological attitude*; that alone will bring about a sufficient subsequent renunciate effort of estrangement and withdrawal. Any other option, such as diluting the renunciate truth or bypassing it through some intellectual device, departs not only from the Buddhist path, but from any genuine spirituality whenever and wherever it may be found in the world. Thus, whatever the circumstance may be, and however much hard and difficult renunciation circumstantially and psychologically may be, the answer is never to ignore its psychological significance, let alone replace it with something else or, worse, something that is even contradictory with it.

And this does not need to mean that innovative Buddhist ideas and practices that have gone beyond these ancient standards are bad or wrong, but only that they are incompatible and not interchangeable, to an extent or another, with an experiential renunciate Buddhism, and regardless of the question of which of the two is the more original or authentic! For the very purpose of our quest and search after the original is not justified by the mere historical value or truth of it, but rather by the *recovery* of such vital Buddhist principles of psychology and manner of practice that we have been clearly unable to glean or reconstruct with a sufficient degree of clarity, preciseness, and certitude, through textual interpretation alone. But being fundamentally an experiential doctrine, any vivid understanding and revival of it *as an experiential doctrine*, and not as a subject of study, must depend on its actual experiencing and practising. A researcher or expert in history

may indeed be articulate in his use of language as he attempts to explain how the sport of water polo, for example, originated and developed till the present time; but it will not be him who will be best fitted for the task of explaining how is one to exercise his muscles, score goals, and win the game! Even simply swimming, floating, not drowning in water, is a task that though may be intellectually explained or described in words, yet cannot be accomplished until one has actually plunged through the water and felt its touch and presence enveloping one's body! In the same way, the discovering, revealing and explanation of Buddhist psychology and practice appears to me to be the ultimate task and duty of serious practitioners, whether monastic or lay: but the accomplishment of such task requires leading the authentic life of the ancient *Śramana* or contemplative renunciate ascetic, not necessarily in its circumstantial environmental details, but most importantly in its inward psychological qualities, and thereby learn first-hand about such subtle aspects and details of practice and of the path that have been otherwise veiled and hidden from the eyes of those attempting to grasp them from without experience. Whether or not such serious, sincere, and purposeful practitioners succeed in living in circumstantial withdrawal, seclusion, and asceticism, is only secondary to the necessity of living with a *psychological attitude* that upholds and is devoted to the principles of alienation and dispassion with regard to the mundane and the temporal.

For it is precisely the essentially psychological nature of the Buddha's message that makes its investigation and discovery a more complicated endeavour that requires the input of *many* rather than few such devoted practitioners, out of the *shared and common* in the experience of which we may finally be able to glean and reconstruct the path with much confidence, avoiding thereby the confusion and uncertainty that could arise in our understanding of it due to individual variances, idiosyncrasies, anomalies and discrepancies. This will be just as how the whole story began, when the early Indian contemplative meditators gathered together and gradually laid the foundations of what finally developed into ancient Indian psychology. The same process must recommence in our contemporary times, with the great advantage that we do not need to start from scratch, but rather from the solid foundation that we already possess thanks to the Pāli texts and to the recorded descriptions and experiences of accomplished Buddhist practitioners! With such sincere and purposeful renunciate practitioners

reporting and documenting their genuine and authentic experiences, generation after another, the resultant accumulation of such wealth of knowledge and precious experience, which would otherwise remain accessible only in part to each individual practitioner, shall become collected and gathered in a gradually and increasingly forming whole, made known to everyone, and never again lost.

The revival of any authentic form of Buddhist practice depends necessarily and primarily on the success of this quest; all alternative conceptual or abstract means will be necessarily inferior, and have already proven their disappointing failure. But as we have seen, in order for more individuals in our contemporary times to embark on a path of genuine Buddhist practice; something else needs to be revived at first, some kind of sentiment, attitude, or culture; one that used to thrive in the distant past, in such times when the Buddha lived, but that has become now at best dormant, and at worst replaced by its opposite, in the consciousness of the contemporary human; *individual nobility*.

"I think that taking life seriously means something such as this: that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. [...] Manipulative, utopian science, by deadening human sensitivity, would also deprive men of the heroic in their urge to victory. And we know that in some very important way this falsifies our struggle by emptying us, by preventing us from incorporating the maximum of experience. It means the end of the distinctively human — or even, we must say, the distinctively organismic." —Ernest Becker

"No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell." —Carl Jung

"We carry our past with us, to wit, the primitive and inferior man with his desires and emotions, and it is only with an enormous effort that we can detach ourselves from this burden. If it comes to a neurosis, we invariably have to deal with a considerably intensified shadow. And if such a person wants to be cured it is necessary to find a way in which his conscious personality and his shadow can live together." —Carl Jung.

"It's much easier to meditate here. I have no big ambition. Just living simply and seeing clearly. I cannot change the world; I cannot change anybody, not even myself, but I can watch. If I'm wise I will just watch without getting upset about anybody or anything. Who am I to carry the world on my shoulder?"

—Sayadaw U Jotika

It is indeed the characteristic story of such transcendental doctrines which documenting happened only many centuries after their proclamation by their founders, and through a process of oral-transmission, writing, copying, compilation and redaction, of which we know little or even nothing at all. It is inevitable that the original substance or essence of such a doctrine will be sought-after by many seekers, and that the search will only with great difficulty, if ever, arrive at the *intention* of the originator of the doctrine beyond any doubt or uncertainty. As we have seen, seekers have set about this quest in all sorts of different ways and styles, but one thing remained identical in them all: they were all "seekers", driven by a strong desire or

teleology to affirm and assert some truth. Those who were already followers and believers of some form of Buddhism or another; there was no stopping them from *interpreting* both the "textual evidence" and its historicity in one way rather than in another; and though the essence of the transcendental doctrine becomes here a matter of *opinion* and *faith* – only the very few among such believers will admit to it; the great majority rather go on presenting their faith as if it was drawn precisely from historical and demonstrable facts which they sincerely believe exist out there in some impartial and objective reality. The same applies to a considerable extent to those who (*tried*, and hopelessly so!) to take a mature, dispassionate, scientific academic path yet often betrayed a hidden similar such teleological faith just as well, or else relied on a rather embarrassing level of speculative logic without which they couldn't possibly affirm any conclusion of significance or worth, given the condition of painful and punishing scarcity of historical documents in things Buddhist and things Indian in general.

It appears to me that the most vivid manifestation supporting these observations is how those who have thus concerned themselves with the issue of Buddhist authenticity tended to neglect or remained ignorant of the self-evident yet highly important fact, that Buddhism is an *ancient doctrine* that was developed in *ancient times* for an audience of *ancient people*, and they exhibit rather a characteristic and consistent lack of sensitivity and awareness of what it means for a doctrine, transcendental or mundane, *to be ancient*. For the consciousness and life and zeitgeist of ancient people differed so greatly and fundamentally from ours; from anything that ever came after them in fact, and perhaps with the sole exception of the European Renaissance which indeed gave birth to a remarkable revival of some of the most characteristic features of the ancient consciousness, much of which have since then gradually disappeared from the world, and ironically more so in Europe and the west than in many other parts of the globe!

For nothing exists in our cotemporary times which could possibly compare to the purposeful, sharp, and awakened spirit which brought about the curiosity, motivation, resolve, and sincerity of ancient people as they engaged with the many religious and transcendental doctrines that were flourishing side by side with mundane ones in those vibrant and interesting times. It was a time when the zeitgeist was one of faith in the power and victory of the human *individual*, and of the ultimate meaningfulness and

value of standing up to suffering and overcoming it by means of faith in human triumphant heroicism and nobility. Unlike the case with contemporary superheroes, the vast popularity in ancient times of the gladiator, for example, and of Hercules, was not because they "*saved others*" from suffering, but was rather justified by the nobility and heroism inherent in not only overcoming such suffering that befell them in life, but further that which they went out of their way to *seek*. That alone, in and of itself, was what inspired the ancient mind and evoked in the ancient heart a sense of inspiration, worth, and meaning.

This contrasts so sharply with the present emergence and prevalence of a secular world-culture that exhibits an excessive level of neurotic fear, intolerance and opposition even to the *possibility* of suffering, with which the individual is bound to become increasingly obsessed, while at the same time remain blind and ignorant about both his own inward and deeply engrained perplexity and darkness, and also his inward spiritual strength and light that is capable of discerning the transcendental origin and significance of suffering, along with the quest of its inward overcoming. It is a situation where not the slightest semblance to Buddhism can be found! For in ancient times, on the other hand, when the prevalent culture was one which rather celebrated the individual triumphant overcoming of cosmological and transcendental suffering and hardship; no transcendental or mundane doctrine could appeal to the people or prove even its relevance to them without demonstrating its effective liberating practice or *way of life*, and how such practice led "experientially", rather than abstractly or conceptually, to a triumphant happiness or release from suffering. And indeed it was precisely such *ehipassika* or power of experiential demonstrability that led to the popularity of both mundane and religious way-of-life doctrines over the other abstract and eristic ones. The teacher gave a method, a training course, something to practice and apply in experience, and claimed that such exercise leads to no less than the overcoming of suffering, not as it exists circumstantially in the world, but strictly *as a natural transcendental phenomenon* that manifests and that is felt directly in one's psyche. It was for this reason that it was so important for these ancient sages to live exactly according to the principles which they proclaimed, including the principle of abstinence and renunciation.

The ancient people living in the midst of such multiplicity of doctrines could not but find in themselves a corresponding attitude of curiosity, scepticism, and independent inquiry, as to which of them all, contradictory and irreconcilable as in many cases, was the true doctrine. This is another feature which distinguishes ancient people from contemporary people, whose contact with these ancient doctrines became increasingly conceptual and based on the analysis of texts, rather than organic and natural, based on direct contact and interaction with sages and practitioners in whose appearance, behaviour, speech, and life, the transcendental doctrine directly manifests itself without any ambiguity or confusion. Thus it was in ancient times, and only hardly at present, that people stated with clarity *'why'* they follow the way of one doctrine and believe in one soteriology *rather than* another. And so also it was mostly in ancient times, and hardly at present, that practitioners found in their hearts the motivation, inspiration, and resolve, to live according to the principles and tenets of their respective doctrines, and endure the difficulties of abstinence and renunciation, as the immediate psychological benefits of such remained clear and vivid in their minds and experience, not needing any explanation or interpretation.

This shows the extent by which lifestyle and way of living are so essential to the experiential and genuine understanding of ancient transcendental doctrines; a task which is least doable by anyone whose thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, are conditioned by a culture of fear and intolerance with regard to the slightest suffering or experience of pain. This is precisely what brings down motivation and gives rise to depression: when the practitioner does not find in himself the awakened resolve and alerted wisdom to not only put up with suffering, but even to *seek it* when it goes missing; just as Hercules did! Indeed the monk in the renunciate robes appears to me rather like an ancient superhero who, abiding in his noble element, is perpetually set about seeking the destruction of his archenemy: *bhava*. To him such deep and profound and perpetual states of mind, *his own* boredom, *his own* lethargy, *his own* restlessness, ego, desire and fear, and entire range of conditioned experience, is precisely the very villain that arouses his noble impulse to fight and to resist, and motivates him to emerge from darkness and to act with resolve and determination; with the mantra of faith striking at his heart like a resonating church-bell: *"this suffering can end, this suffering will end, this suffering can end, this suffering will end, ..."*.

Such ancient nobility which manifests in admitting, understanding, and accepting such cosmologically ordained filth and weakness that is planted deep within *one's own* heart, and then carrying upon oneself the heroic and noble responsibility of deliverance from its morbid impact, is contradictory with a culture of immense vulnerability and antagonism to circumstantial causes of suffering, and the prevalence and reach of which reflects itself in a society that has become no longer able to tolerate even its own self! It is just like an autoimmune disease that responds with great aversion and violence to every threat, irrespective of its significance or magnitude, and thereby ends up destroying the very body that supports it. It is a culture that promotes fighting '*the other*', whatever that alien other may be, and glorifying oneself thereby, as if that self *has never been and will never be even capable* of evil, cruelty, hatred, and hurt, or as if the removal of these negative states in oneself is conditioned by their removal, at first, in "the other", or worse, in the removal of the *very existence* of the other! Where the transcendental argument states that we are all lacking, we are all imperfect, and that the quest toward purity and sainthood is necessarily and fundamentally *individual*; the mundane argument states that *some of us* are lacking, *some of us* are imperfect, and that the quest is one that aims at a *collective* purity that will materialise by eliminating or suppressing those non-conforming alien others. But we will find that any doctrine or ideology that concerns itself with the defining of '*evil*' and the course it takes for its overcoming, places itself in a firm religious station, even if the definitions it offers are entirely mundane and secular. And thus, the trouble will be that it is not possible to concede to transcendental an mundane arguments both as true, or live pursuing what they both identify as deliverance at the same time, simply because the two positions couldn't possibly coexist, and that it is not possible to embark on the one quest in the name of the other, going so far in the pursuit of one while dragging the other along, with all their contradictory and irreconcilable fundamental positions and motivations with regard to the origin, nature, and transcendence of evil and suffering.

The most vivid manifestation of such pseudo-secular pseudo-religious condition of present-day social culture can be readily identifiable in the emergence and spread of *moral judgmentalism*, where such practices as public humiliation and "naming and shaming" of wrongdoers, and the exercise of a collective social punishment that never forgives and never

forgets, and that condemns and isolates from society with the most severe and threatening measures *even the good deeds* of the perpetrators – become the basic means by which people en masse get to develop a sense of moral purity or uprightness within themselves. The *medieval* presumption here is that one becomes inwardly clean, and remains inwardly clean, by means of insulating oneself completely from everything that is *externally* unclean! Such medieval attitude is precisely what ensures that the awareness and attention is no less than *obsessed* with the filth that exists without, while at the same time totally oblivious to that which exists within, despite of the fact that it *necessarily manifests* in one's own thoughts, feelings, and even outward behaviour. And instead of understanding such manifestation of *one's own* evil as an invitation, a call, an angelic messenger from what's godly and truly benevolent in this morbid existence, to arise to the highest possible purpose of human existence; the poor individual, terrified by a punishing and merciless *inquisitionist* society, finds nothing in himself other than keep his deeply dug guilt and shame hidden from all eyes; a secret that is never revealed, perhaps not even to oneself, and that must be carried silently wherever one goes, like a scandalous and feared contagious venereal disease; a crushing burden that one knows not what it means, whence it came, and what to do with; and which unbearable heaviness can drive an otherwise worthwhile and capable human heart into the most morbid states of madness and suffering, all the way until it finally rests in the grave or burns in the crematorium. The more, it seems, one endeavours outwardly to herald and declare his devotion to the temporal social virtues of his age, the more he is inwardly weighed down by nothing other than transcendental and primordial vice and suffering!

And though the audience is not necessarily lacking in intelligence and purpose, and is perhaps even starving for a deep and profound teaching that reveals to them the trouble with their human condition and the way out of the suffering under which they continually drudge; the impact of such present-day social culture on the Buddhist doctrine has been destructive and dangerous, already manifesting in an increasingly *moralistic* and *virtue-signalling* Buddhist discourse that goes out of its transcendental, withdrawn, and renunciate way, to comment on and *socially-engage* with current public affairs that are far removed from any fundamental spiritual purport or significance. It is a discourse that likewise takes sides against mundane

manifestations of *evil* and denounces *wrongdoers*, and differs from the aversive tune of its secular ideological counterpart only by means of repeating the mantra of: "*metta*", "*metta*", ..., that has become about the most fundamental Buddhist teaching given by many teachers and speakers to the laity who are mostly still deprived, still hungry to hear the wisdom of the Buddha explained in a clear and vivid tongue that they can understand, and made accessible in a feasible manner that they can experience and put to practice. And what of this "*metta*"? It is a Buddhist concept of "benevolence" or "goodwill", and which they call "loving-kindness" or something of the emotive sort, and teach as a pseudo-moralistic pseudo-psychological practice of *being-good*, "toward oneself and toward others", and that would only questionably be regarded as befitting for the mental development and maturation even of little kids, and that can only with great difficulty be distinguished from Bob Marley's "*don't worry, be happy!*", and which popularity among its seekers comes from nothing other than that fleeting dose of *feel-good* dopamine which it offers, and which is similar in its stupefying effect to that induced by the tranquilising cannabis as it consumes the nervous system to the reggae beat. The result is the opposite of what emancipation requires; a condition which only reinforces the seeker's oblivion to his innermost suffering and conditioning rather than awakens and alerts his attention and awareness to their dominating and profound presence, and perhaps even adding to such oblivion a growing delusion, indeed "like a golden tree seen in one's ludicrous dreams", that one who is thus conditioned by *feeling good and being good*, has become already possessed of some transcendental freedom, gnosis, and purity!

For in as much as Buddhism emphasises the importance of suffering, it equally emphasises understanding it as something that emanates from one's own oblivious motivations. And in as much as Buddhism emphasises the importance of awareness of one's suffering and not fearing it, *therefore*, it equally emphasises opening up to one's darkness and not fearing it. It is not by practising "goodness" that one gets to "be good"; one becomes good not by practising anything *externally*, but solely by opening up to the "bad" that has been accumulating within since times immemorial, and which exists in many layers and layers, one deeper than the other, one subtler than the other, at the very bottom and core of *one's own* existence. The *guts* that it takes to even imagine slitting one's heart open like that, exposing the filth

that is within it to the sky and its daylight, so that those many layers of it which exist deeper beyond the reach of one's own awareness, become finally revealed! What unflinching faith and purpose is required for the accomplishing of the great task that is upon one, other than that which brought prophet Abraham to drag his beloved son, a symbol of his own heart, unto the desert with a sword with which to slit his throat open, to show his obedience and devotion to God and to the word of transcendental Truth! And how is it ever possible to embark on such a noble quest of self-purification, exactly, in experience, in any way other than by allowing, facilitating, and even stimulating the arousal and manifestation of one's own inward agony and darkness in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural experience? The whole point of Buddhist practice, and of its remarkable effectiveness, is that it provides both the conceptual and experiential education and training through which one becomes enabled and empowered to directly observe the wildest and darkest manifestations of nature and ego in one's experience, while responding to such horrific scenery with calm, self-mastery, and wisdom – precisely the feat of the Buddha upon the night of his glorious Awakening.

Thus, the story shows the Buddha seeking out Angulimāla, the most dreaded cold-blooded serial killer of the time. It was not by shaming him that the Buddha succeeded in transforming his destiny; for Angulimāla was proud beyond any possible sense of guilt and self-contempt, and the finger-trophies which he severed off the hands of his victims embellished his powerful countenance as a necklace that constantly hanged down on his chest. No, the Buddha rather demonstrated to him *what else* he can do with such terrible, ruthless, gruesome power that was in him! The sum of all the darkness, violence, cruelty and antagonism, that is in one's heart, is not evil because it exists there –for it exists there *by nature*– but rather because one is not aware of them, and if he is, then because one doesn't know how to be in control of them rather than be controlled by them: "*Channel, wield, mould, redirect that same tremendous power of your heart against 'your own' nature, and against 'your own' ego; antagonise them, destroy them, make an irrevocable victim out of them, cut off their fingers and every other part and member of their presence and being, and see what 'further' infinite and eternal power and release shall become of your existence!*"

To be even more powerful, more free, more fearless than Angulimāla; no one would ever think that any such enticing thing is possible or even exists! That's why Angulimāla was so proud! And now that the challenge has been made, the ruthless man can put up with anything; there is no tough practice that he couldn't bring himself to master, and no hardship that he couldn't transcend, in no time! Lo and behold: Angulimāla won the battle against his own deepest nature and his own powerful ego: the fierceness stopped, the violence stopped, the cruelty stopped, all antagonism stopped; Angulimāla became a saint! Adoration!

The story is thus not one which starts from *being-good* and ends in heaven, but rather precisely from brute and animal and worm, to eternity. This is the ancient archetypal story of the victorious human, who emerges not from an already established sublimity, but rather from the most miserable and contemptible animality, and reaches up to the highest stations of immutable transcendental existence, or in our Buddhist psychological terms: *unconditioned existence*. That story of great transcendental and spiritual human motivation and effort, is human's very victory, and there is but little, lesser victory, for one who moves from good and pious and kind and excellent and near-perfect, to the saint, and no victory at all and no story to tell, for one who was born saint! And though it may be open-ended, such as our story of nibbāna is par excellence, yet every story must end; for a story that never ends is one that is without purpose, without a lesson, without a morale, and without meaning.

Every story must end; and whether the story of the human being will end on a cheerful and triumphant note, rather than a dark one where he's being devoured by the plagues of oblivion and perplexity – depends entirely on the great revival of the wisdom of the ancients, and of the capacities of more individuals in society to enact it successfully and effectively in their lives, to make it visible and known to others, so that others too may join in the great journey toward inward deliverance, and make something meaningful and noble out of the story of their consciousness, steering it toward a meaningful, toward a sublime end; toward an end that transcends decay and death, and the endless repetition, of birth.



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Motivation And Effort In Buddhist Soteriology

Nature manipulates the strings, but the living creature, just like a marionette, cannot see neither the strings nor the manipulation nor the manipulator; it identifies with its *moves* as if they were its own, coming from its independent will. p. 38

"Dukkha" in this latter sense encompasses all forms, all moments, and all possibilities, of *conditioned existence and experience*. For the Buddha it did not matter what one is, a human or a god or an animal or a ghost; all are fundamentally unfree, bound, moved by strings and conditioned by natural forces that they cannot even see, let alone control, and as such their existence is only a display of different forms and types of marionettes, mobilised and animated by the subtle prowess of nature, on the great theatrical stage of Samsara. p. 98-99

At last the vital question appears: If thought, attention, and memory, are beyond our control and are driven solely by natural evolutionary mechanisms, and if willpower cannot be relied on to reach a transcendental goal, and if the manipulation of the body brings but very limited results for the deliverance of the mind – how is it then, that any emancipation is at all possible? And how do we get to develop faith in it in the first place? And what is it that then determines and regulates our motivation and effort in the course of its experiential realisation? p. 140

Many contradictory ideas have been said about the Buddhist ennobling path of practice. Some say it is extremely difficult and no longer possible for humans to commit to in earnest, while others say it is not only still doable, but even "effortless"! Both positions are problematic. [...] Indeed, *chandanirodha* or the *unconditioning of motivation*, constitutes the foundation upon which Buddhist emancipation is based, and is the ultimate guide to the right practice of effort. It is one of the most subtle aspects of Buddhist psychology and practice, and throughout the following pages I shall endeavour to describe it in the simplest possible manner I can. p. 179-180

I would then say that, just like the picture of the camel traveling across the great desert, the Buddhist path is one that is effectively *traversable with the least necessary effort*. [...] However and in all cases, as we have just seen, what the "least" and the "most" effort mean in the course of Buddhist practice will have to remain without the domain of willpower, and within such mental and psychological domains as self-awareness and mental calm as we shall see further. p. 193

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